

THE PATH IN THE RAVINE

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SERIES





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THE PATH IN THE RAVINE.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE BEAR PAW MOUNTAINS.

WHEN Russell Hillson entered the United States Military Academy at West Point, from one of the New England States, his resolution was that of almost every young gentleman admitted to that institution; he would graduate at the head of his class, which numbered 103. This is a commendable ambition, since it ensures the best efforts of the cadet, but, inasmuch as only one budding general of the army can attain that distinction, it follows that the others must be disappointed.

One of the shocks, to which the parents of the prim cadets are destined, is that of awaking to the fact that a young man may be the pride of his school at home, and display promise of becoming one of the most distinguished

of his countrymen, yet a few months at West Point are quite certain to bring out the fact that there are a great many in his class brighter than he.

“I tell you our 'Lige will show 'em what's what,” said Deacon Harris, when his only son and heir left home with his trunk, and his appointment from the Secretary of War; “there isn't a boy in Pike County that is his ekle; he'll do credit to Pennsylvania and more'n likely he'll be put in teacher before he's been there long; 'tween you and me I wouldn't be s'prised if he took charge of things and run 'em, for 'Lige is as smart as they make 'em.”

Alas, at the end of half a year Elijah joined the thirty-eight “found,” and went back to Pike County with the dismal word that the pace up the Hudson was too hot for him. His father was dumfounded, and for a time couldn't understand it, but, with a knowing shake of his head, declared he was now convinced of what he had suspected all along: gross favoritism was shown in that school, which is really as free from it as any institu-

tion in the world. Besides, he knew the administration had learned of the active war he had waged in Pike County against it during the last election, and was mean enough to take this way of paying him off for his manly independence.

But young Hillson was more fortunate, for nature and training had done much for him. He was mentally bright, had a fine physique, was an excellent horseman, and possessed the rare good sense of knowing that the first duty of a soldier is to obey, and he always did it cheerfully. True, it was rather rough to be "skinned" because the inspector detected a couple of drops of water on the bare floor of his room one day; and when a large mosquito was boring into the end of his nose while at parade, he gave a quick flirt of his hand and not only smashed his tormentor but got a demerit at the same moment.

A week later, when Yelverton of Arkansas came to the front at "rear open order," he was sure he never saw a pair of ears stand out more comically than those on his nicely cropped head, and smiled. It was only a

shadowy yielding of the facial muscles, but it was enough to win another demerit, as were slips which he made now and then. These strike the outsider as trifles light as air, but they have their weight at the institution, where, it may be said, discipline ranks all other attainments of the cadet.

“Grant and Sherman and Thomas and Lee and Sheridan and all the rest went through it, and *I can,*” muttered Hillson, closing his lips, and making sure that the candles, by which he was “boning” after taps, were so well screened by the blankets over the window and transom that no passing officer could detect a chance ray.

At the end of the first year, when the class was reduced to an even sixty, Russell stood fourth, which was certainly a creditable record. He was still in the first section in all his studies.

But the second year brought its stumbling block in the form of Church’s Calculus, which swung him into the second section. This was a good way from the “immortals,” in the sixth section, but nearer than he liked. He

struggled hard and came within a hair of getting back, but he stepped over the threshold of the third year with the handicap still upon him.

It was odd that on young Hillson's nineteenth birthday, when he strolled down to the gymnasium to examine the lists posted there, he discovered that at last he was in the first section again. Had it been a year later he would have received the usual "bumping" down by the sink, by which the other cadets love to express their congratulations.

Mineralogy and petrography worried him the third year, and law was the lion in his path during his last terms.

"You are doing well," said his old friend, General Hancock, "for in these days any young man does well who succeeds in graduating at all at West Point, where we old-timers would have to hustle from the beginning."

He might have taken consolation also from the fact stated by General Sherman, as late as June, 1889, when talking with a lot of us on the porch of the West Point Hotel, that the history of the West Point graduates shows

the record of the lowest five in each class exceeds that of the highest five.

Russell came out thirteenth in a class of fifty. This slid him below the engineers and into the artillery, but he took the cavalry by choice. He was fond of horses and fancied the exhilarating service on the frontier. He had a natural dread of the flaming climate of Arizona and the Southwest, and was greatly relieved, therefore, when he found himself assigned to the —th cavalry, at Fort Assinaboine, away up in Northern Montana, at the junction of the Big Sandy Creek and Milk River, and within the Indian Reservation of the Gros Ventre, Piegan, Blackfeet, and River Crow tribes.

The Big Sandy Creek flows from the southwest, and like its own tributaries, Duck Creek, Box Elder, and smaller streams, has its source among the wild fastnesses of the Bear Paw Mountains, while the Beaver Creek, Peckham's Creek, Clear Creek, Snake Creek, People's Creek, and others, rise in the Little Rocky Mountains and flow into the Milk River to the east of the fort.

The first lieutenant of the —th cavalry was Albert Palmer of Illinois, several years older than Hillson, while Martin Draper, a grizzled colonel of the Civil War, was post commander. Many of the troopers had seen service on the battlefields of the south, and the force was one of the best on the frontier.

The life of a soldier on the border is generally of the most monotonous nature, consisting of the same round of parade, inspection, drill, and officer of the day duty, with hours of idleness between, enlivened now and then by some brisk marching toward a point whence have come reports of trouble that generally prove groundless.

Naturally the *attachés* of such a remote post as Fort Assinaboine, located in one of the best hunting regions of the world, find time to look for game, which is tempting enough to attract professional sportsmen from the other side of the Atlantic. Thus it was no unusual thing for Lieutenants Palmer and Hillson to engage in an excursion among the rugged defiles of the Bear Paw Mountains, whenever permission could be obtained for that purpose.

Less than a score of miles to the south of the fort was a section which had become somewhat familiar, for more than once they found the rarest and most stirring kind of enjoyment there. The young officers were always well mounted, their weapons consisting of a revolver and magazine rifle, and in the autumn time the air was cool and bracing.

It may not be generally known that the elevation of the greater part of the State of Montana is so slight, compared with the surrounding States and Territories, that the climate is much milder than at other places of the same latitude.

“I wonder where this trail would take us if followed to the end,” said Palmer, as his horse led the way up the gradual ascent, around boulders, massive rocks, by the side of cañons and chasms, where a misstep was like to bring irretrievable disaster.

“I suppose,” replied Hillson, “that years ago, before the reservation was established, there was some village of Blackfeet or Crow Indians located among the wildest portions, that they might be safer from their enemies,

and this mountain trail is the route by which the warriors reached the level country northward to hunt the buffaloes."

"Some of these days, when we can gain the time, we will start on a little tour of exploration," said Palmer, who, like his companion, was in high spirits at the prospect of a day's sport in the mountains.

"Holloa!" exclaimed Hillson, a moment later, observing that his friend in advance had halted, "what's up?"

"I suspect we are at the end of our tether," laughed Palmer, turning his head; "it looks as if the aboriginal authorities don't keep their bridges in good repair."

Hillson edged his mare ahead until her nose was at the haunch of the horse, when the rider, by peering forward, saw the cause of the abrupt stoppage.

The mountain trail followed for some distance the side of a range whose slopes were covered with a thick growth of timber and no end of rocks, boulders, ravines, and chasms. The course was steadily ascending, but the path was not broad enough for the horsemen

to ride abreast, and not infrequently was so narrow that, accustomed as they were to danger, they shrank close to the wall on their left, caught their breath, and asked themselves whether they were not taking more chances than was prudent.

The trail, so far as they could judge, had not been travelled lately by a horseman, though any number of Indians or white hunters might have made their way over it on foot, without leaving traces that could have been detected except by the trained eye of the dusky red man.

On the left was the mountain, and on the right the vast slope descended at such an angle that a boulder once started would crash to the bottom, hundreds of feet below, with almost resistless momentum. A man might save himself by grasping the trees and taking advantage of the interposing rocks and obstructions, but it would have taken a good deal of skill and much outlay of strength.

CHAPTER II.

AN IMPRESSIVE SCENE.

DIRECTLY in front of Lieutenant Palmer the ledge along which they were threading their way was broken by a rent a couple of yards wide. It looked as if some enormous rock, starting near the crest of the mountain, had shot downward with terrific force, and bounding aloft, dropped upon this section of the path, carrying it away like so much cardboard.

“There seems to be nothing the matter with it just beyond,” remarked Hillson, rising in his stirrups and looking over the shoulder of his friend, “and it is no jump for either of our animals.”

“That isn’t the trouble,” replied Palmer; “but, after the leap, will their hoofs land on solid ground? If not, we shall take a toboggan slide into the gorge, without a chance of climbing up again.”

It was a serious question, and the young officers debated it several minutes before deciding upon their course. They had penetrated so far that they were loath to turn back, while, with all their pluck, they hesitated to advance.

“An elephant tests a shaky structure before trusting it,” said Hillson, “and that’s what we will do.”

“How?”

“I’ll show you,” he replied, slipping from his saddle and taking the mare by the bit. With a few gentle words, he backed her several paces and then asked Palmer to do the same. “We shall have to back further than this to find a place broad enough for them to turn round,” he explained, as the first lieutenant imitated him. “Now let me pass,” added Hillson, placing himself in front of his companion, who watched his movements with no little interest. Hillson gave no further explanation, but, finding himself in advance, paused a moment, as if measuring with his eye the yawning abyss before him. Then, gathering his muscles, he ran swiftly to the

edge of the break, and with a vigorous bound landed on the other side.

The meaning of this action was manifest: he wished to examine the trail where their horses must alight. Stooping over, he tested the flinty ground by means of his hands and feet.

“It’s all right,” he said, addressing his friend, “you needn’t be afraid to try it.”

“Of course not, if I follow *your* style ; make room for me.”

A short, rapid run, and he dropped in front of the other, who stepped back to give him space.

The intelligent animals watched the action of their riders and awaited orders to follow them. Palmer called his steed by name and he instantly obeyed, while a single whistle of Hillson to Kitty brought her almost upon the heels of the leader.

The animals caused some misgiving, for their greater weight was sure to put the edge of the trail to a severer test than did the youths, who made sure of clearing by several feet. The mare did not deem it worth while

to exert herself to the degree of her predecessors, and, as a consequence, one of her hoofs knocked the dirt loose and she sank as if about to go over the precipice. Hillson called sharply to her and sprang forward to seize her bit, but, before he could do so, she struggled to her feet, regained her poise, and shook her pretty head as if to say :

“Don't worry about me, young man ; I can take care of myself.”

The officers remounted, and once more moved up the mountain trail, along which they had already advanced further than ever before. Their experience taught them to be guarded, for other gaps were likely to be found, and treacherous foundations were apt to occur where everything looked solid and safe.

The afternoon was half gone, and the sky, which was clear when they left the fort, was clouded and had every appearance of a coming storm. From the fort, they had witnessed a great fall of rain in the direction of the mountains a couple of days before, but feared no inconvenience therefrom, though the pools of

water in the hollows showed that the warm sun had not yet evaporated all the moisture.

Some of the older men had warned them against venturing in the mountains, where the rush of water in the pent up cañons was often sudden and resistless, as in the appalling calamity which not long since desolated Johnstown and the surrounding country, but the young officers were ardent and hopeful, and, like many others of their age and limited experience, were confident they knew how to take care of themselves.

They were pushing their way up the mountain trail in the guarded manner shown from the first, when Palmer, still a short way in advance, halted with the abruptness of before.

“Is it another break?” called his companion.

“Yes, but not of the other kind,” replied Palmer, partly turning his head as before.

“Have we reached the end of the road—well, I declare!”

The exclamation was caused by the sudden disappearance of the leader. Had not Hillson been looking directly at him, he would have believed the ground had given away under the

hoofs of his horse and let him and his rider down to destruction ; but nothing of the kind took place. Palmer had turned the head of his steed to the left, and ridden seemingly straight into the solid mountain, as if entering the door to some mysterious cavern.

But they were not in a land of mystery, and Hillson twitched the rein of Kitty, who stepped more briskly. A few paces further and, without any direction from her rider, she, too, turned sharply to the left, passing out of sight of anyone moving along the trail, either above or below the point of vanishment.

The mountain wall which they had followed so long seemed to have been rent apart by some convulsion of nature, ages before, leaving a rent several yards wide, which wound indefinitely in front of them. The bottom, although rough and uneven, was comparatively level, offering such easy travel for their animals that the change of direction was made with but slight hesitation on the part of the leader.

At the moment of turning into this "side issue," as it may be called, Hillson saw his

companion only two or three rods in advance. The chasm was broad enough for them to ride abreast, and he checked his horse for the younger to join him.

“I don't know how far this can be traced,” said Palmer, “but it struck me as worth looking into.”

“You look into it before entering,” replied Hillson, “and it may prove more extensive than the other. However, if it has not too many branches we ought to be in no danger of getting lost.”

As the couple progressed it began to look as if they were entering a land of wonders and enchantment. The channel gradually widened until it was a hundred feet broad. This increased after a time to double that extent, which, so far as they could learn, was its greatest width. The mountains rose on either hand to a height of three, four, and even five hundred feet. The sides were composed of enormous gray rocks, with irregular projections, a huge mass sometimes reaching so far out over the gorge that it seemed on the point of toppling over and falling with a crash that

would have crushed everything beneath into fragments.

Between the many layers of rocks and boulders were patches of dirt, which afforded enough sustenance to numerous stunted pines for them to acquire a sturdy foothold with which they had defied the storms. These seemed to shoot out in many places from cracks in the rocks themselves, where no earth could be discerned (though of course it must have been there), after which the tough, wiry trunks curved upward, so that the crests of the trees, like all vegetation everywhere, was turned toward the point where the sun first showed itself.

There were other places where a species of running vine of ivy clung to the jagged masses of stone and climbed upward, as it does along the walls of the old baronial castles of the Rhine, smothering all things in its path, and reaching for others beyond.

There were spots along the upper edge of the ravine which must have been attained long before, for the green vine kept on growing until it tottered several feet above its sup-

port, the beautiful top so delicately balanced, that, as the wondering youths gazed upward at it, it was seen to sway gently back and forth in the gentle breeze which was not to be felt by them in the gorge below.

Here and there among this wealth of vegetation a violet flower gleamed like a jewel against the emerald background, while the trunk of one huge vine that had been detached dangled downward as if it were an immense serpent watching for its prey in the depths below.

By a common impulse the young officers drew the reins of their animals and looked around them, impressed and awed by the striking scene. They had been among the mountains before, but never had they beheld such a sight as this.

“This is worth a long journey to see,” remarked Palmer, in tones unconsciously lowered, as a person will modulate his voice when standing within the cool shadows of some vast cathedral.

“Yes; nature laughs at the efforts of man to rival her grandeur and power. What a

prodigious earthquake it must have been that wrenched these mountains asunder!”

“And why should it have been an earthquake, when the same power that creates the earthquake could fashion this temple?”

“Only that the strata on the sides of the gorge correspond so closely that they must have been once joined together.”

“I have noticed that, and probably you are right, but—look!”

CHAPTER III.

AT BAY.

AT the point where the young officers had halted the wild gorge was fully two hundred feet wide, the vast walls of gray and black rock on either hand being covered in places with dwarf pine and vines, as already described, while the trees far above their heads grew in most places to the very edge of the ravine.

This gorge, instead of following a straight course through the mountains, trended so often to the right and left that the view both in front and rear was brief. A stone's throw in either direction would have brought one to a curve which shut out everything beyond.

The bottom of the ravine was strewn with huge bowlders and rocks, which forced the horsemen to pick their way in and out among them, sometimes riding close to one side and then obliged to pass to the other, before they

could make their way forward. The pools of water in the hollows, between the loose boulders, were connected by a rivulet which showed that at times huge bodies of water rushed through the gorge in the direction of the mountain trail left some time before.

This stream must have possessed a subterranean outlet, since the point where the horsemen turned to the left from the main path was perfectly dry.

That which caused the exclamation of Lieutenant Palmer was a unique scene. At the highest point of the walls above their heads, and only a short distance in advance, a mass of rock, weighing many tons, obtruded over the gorge, expanding as it advanced, until the wonder was how such a colossal pile could be sustained by the neck of stone joining it to the mainland.

This of itself, while striking and picturesque, was not the attraction to the young horsemen. At the moment Lieutenant Palmer cast his eye toward it, he observed an animal picking his way along the rough top toward the outermost point over the gorge. The stone was

not covered by vine, tree, or a shred of vegetation, so the animal was in plain sight.

“It is a big-horn sheep,” whispered Palmer, “and what is he going to do?”

“It looks as if he meant to try a leap to the other side.”

“He is not such a fool as that, when it is fully two hundred feet, and the big-horn isn't lacking in brains.”

“We shall soon see.”

The animal continued his walk until at the furthest point from the edge of the ravine, when, of necessity, he stopped. He gave only a glance at the other side, which was far beyond his reach, when he stopped and looked about him. The watchful creature was quick to perceive the horsemen, hundreds of feet below, in the gorge, and, as they looked up at him, he returned the stare by elevating his head and gazing enquiringly down at them.

The animal must have felt himself safe at that great height, for, although very timid by nature, he showed no signs of fright, and seemed to find something interesting in the sight of the tiny figures far below, where they

were probably the first white men who had entered.

The big-horn sheep is a widely distributed animal, ranging along the mountain chains of the Great Divide from the arid tablelands of Central Mexico to the frozen regions of British America. During the warm weather he climbs the loftiest mountains, often passing above the timber line, while during the blizzard season he descends to the foot-hills or migrates southward.

In Mexico, the animal is known as the cimarrón sheep, and is the only representative of the various kinds of mountain sheep of the Old World. Their weight sometimes reaches four hundred pounds, and, because of their skill in climbing the mountain crags and their alertness against danger, they are regarded as among the choicest prizes of the Rocky Mountain hunter.

The sheep on which the young officers looked, it was easy to see, despite its great elevation, was one of the largest of its kind. Both were stirred by the thought of bringing down such a noble specimen of game.

“I think we can reach him,” said Palmer, after watching the animal for a minute or two.

“I have no doubt of it, but it seems a pity to wing him, after showing such confidence in us.”

“I think it is rather a lack of confidence in our marksmanship,” added the elder, with a laugh, “but he *does* make a fine picture.”

The buck was furnished with a magnificent pair of horns, which curved backward over his neck, and, because of the elevated position of his head, formed the most prominent features of the creature.

Since the two had come out for game, it was hardly in keeping that they should refuse to take advantage of the unexpected chance thrown in their way. Despite the sentimentality of the younger officer, the elder dismounted, in order to take the more careful aim at the sheep, when something in his action caused him to hesitate.

“The fellow is cornered,” said Hillson.

The remark was caused by the sight of a huge gaunt wolf, which was now seen sneaking out on the projecting rock after the sheep,

which it will be seen was caught in a bad box, for while retreat was cut off, he could not reach the mainland without walking directly into the embrace of his enemy, who saw the finest dinner of his life almost within his jaws.

“Now, if you want to test your marksmanship, Palmer, let us try it on that brute that is after him.”

“Wait a minute; every animal is provided by nature with some means of defence. A sheep isn't a very dangerous creature, but even he will fight when driven into a corner, and the old fellow may make better use of those fine horns than we suspect.”

But Hillson saw so little hope for the poor fellow that he was not inclined to wait. While the wolf was stealing toward the animal, he sighted his Winchester with great care at the former and fired. The shot was a difficult one, owing to the unusual position of the wolf, and there was no evidence that he had been hit. Neither he nor the big-horn started or looked down at the point whence the report came. Just then their mutual interest was too intense.

The sheep stood for several seconds staring at the wolf drawing slowly but surely near. He seemed to become panic-stricken, and started forward in a timid way, as if he expected to flank his enemy, but the space was too narrow, and the savage brute was too watchful. The sheep hastily withdrew again to the further edge of his support, where he could not retreat another step without falling into the gorge below. Here he stood with head still erect, and eye fixed upon the beast approaching with the slow certainty of death itself.

After his single shot Hillson did not repeat the attempt, but, like his companion, gave his whole attention to the singular tragedy drawing to a crisis before his eyes. Could he have been certain of tumbling the wolf from his perch he would have fired again, but, since the big-horn seemed doomed under any circumstances, he preferred the simple part of spectator.

When the wolf was within about ten feet, the sheep lowered his head as if he meant to make a fight to the death. He could do some-

thing with those horns, but, after all, they amounted to little against the greater strength, activity, and means of defence possessed by his assailant.

The latter crouched on his belly, as if gathering his muscles for a spring. He must have known the risk he ran, for the sheep was so close to the edge that the momentum was likely to throw both over, unless the defender should brace himself to withstand the shock.

For several seconds neither animal stirred. The wolf lay flat, with jaws parted, and the spectators in the gorge far below fancied they could hear the exultant snarling, as he measured the distance separating them and prepared for his fatal leap.

The splendid big-horn, balanced on the very edge of the bewildering height, waited with his head lowered for the charge. Had he possessed straight, pointed horns like the species of ibex of the Dark Continent, he might have done effective work, but, as it was, he was helpless against his merciless enemy.

CHAPTER IV.

A CRY FROM THE DARKNESS.

IT may have been that in that supreme moment a realizing sense of his helplessness overwhelmed the big-horn, for suddenly, without the least thought of any such thing on the part of the spectators, he wheeled about, so as to face the other way, and made a single tremendous leap straight out into space.

It was a thrilling sight as the despairing animal, with his head thrown far back, so that his curving horns lay on the soft wool on his neck, and his shapely legs gathered under him, went sailing out into the air. His body described a beautiful parabola, until, reaching the further point, it shot straight downward like a stone, its velocity accelerated, until it struck the rocks at the bottom with a violence that must have shattered every bone and driven out the breath of life as if smitten with a bolt of lightning.

The big-horn saw it was simply a choice of deaths, and he wisely chose the least painful. It was a case of deliberate suicide, in which the guilty party cannot be condemned.

The wolf seemed puzzled by what had taken place. The instant the sheep made his leap he rose upon his four feet, and watching him for the instant he was in sight, while he held that position, he trotted to the edge, and, with his nose thrust over the rock, gazed downward at the body descending with such dizzying swiftness, until it lay a shapeless mass at the bottom of the gorge. Then, as if he understood the base trick that had been played upon him, he pointed his snout toward the darkening sky and uttered one long dismal howl of disappointment and rage.

“Let’s try it,” said Hillson, sighting his Winchester at the beast; “he deserves death for his meanness.”

Palmer was more than willing, and he also levelled his weapon at the wolf, which was in the act of repeating his wail when both guns were discharged at the same moment.

The bullets hit him fairly, and the howl

which was issuing from his throat changed to a short yelp, as he leaped straight up in air, doubled together like a jack-knife, and came down on his side, rolling over several times, and, swinging clear of his support, came sprawling through the air to the bottom of the gorge, striking within a few feet of the suicidal big-horn and as devoid of life as he.

By this time the sky had grown so dark that there could be no doubt that a storm was at hand. Vivid flashes of lightning darted across the sky which spanned the ravine, but it was seen that its violence would be spent further in the mountains, and that at the worst the officers would receive nothing more than a severe drenching—an inconvenience which they had learned to bear with equanimity.

It was useless to turn about and ride down the gorge, for they were fully a mile from the point of junction with the mountain trail, which, if reached, would afford them no better shelter than they could obtain where they were.

“I don't think we need suffer much,” re-

marked Hillson, who was scanning their surroundings ; “this place looks as if it can give us something in the way of shelter.”

A short way beyond the point where the two carcasses lay, they observed an inward trend of the rocky wall on their right, the cavity looking extensive enough to afford protection for their animals as well as themselves against the rain, provided no wind drove it in against them. Such a gust was not likely to be encountered at the bottom of the gorge, since there was scarcely room for its formation.

Leaping into their saddles, they guided their horses thither, and were glad enough to find the refuge better than it appeared at first.

They dismounted and drove their ponies as far beneath as possible, and found that an immense mass of rock, hardly twenty feet above their heads, projected outward, sheltering them from any storm that might come.

“I think this is the place to make our camp for the night,” remarked Hillson, after surveying their refuge.

“I don’t believe we can find a better one,” was the reply of Palmer, equally well pleased ;

“but we ought to have fuel to last us through the darkness.”

The rain had not yet begun falling, though the peals of thunder were almost incessant, and it was evident it was descending heavily deeper in the mountains. But it was liable to reach them at any minute, and no time was to be lost.

The gathering of fuel was an easy matter. At times this gorge had served as a cañon or outlet for a vast amount of water from the heart of the rugged range, which had brought trees, limbs, sticks, and *débris* in such quantities that it was deposited on every hand.

Much of this stuff had lain so long exposed to the elements that it was as dry as tinder wood. Leaving their rifles leaning against the rocks by their ponies, the couple began collecting the fuel with a vigor which showed they understood the value of time. As soon as one had his arms full, he ran to the spot selected and threw it to the ground. This was continued until a large pile was gathered, fully enough to last them till daybreak, even if kept burning continually.

Here and there at the sides, and in the middle of the gorge, were patches of grass which their ponies would have been eager to nibble, but they did not wish to expose them to the storm, now threatening to burst at any moment.

The youths, therefore, gave their energies to plucking the grass for their animals. With the time at their disposal they secured a goodly quantity, which, if not as much as the animals could have disposed of, was sufficient to keep them from suffering.

The friends would have gathered more of the succulent grass, but, while they were busy, great drops of water began pattering about them, striking the rocks with a noise like splintering hail. They skurried to shelter, and feeling they had done all that was possible, calmly awaited the breaking of the storm.

It proved less violent than was expected. The drops, although of unusual size and darting downward with a force which made each one audible, were not numerous nor did they continue long. There could be no question,

however, that the floodgates of heaven were opened over the mountains not far off.

But the darkness was awe-inspiring. It became like that of night itself, illumined now and then by vivid flashes of lightning which left the gloom the more intense because of the violent contrast. The sun was so low in the sky that had there been no clouding of its face a deep twilight would have reigned in the gorge, and it was now relieved only by the awful electric display in the heavens.

The ponies showed their indifference to the grandeur of the display by calmly munching the fodder that had been laid before them, while their masters stood side by side, their hats in their hands, silent, admiring, wondering, and adoring the source of all this amazing power.

For a full hour there was no diminution. Then the storm subsided almost as rapidly as it had risen. The sullen mutterings of the thunder continued, but they receded until they were heard only now and then, while the flashes were so much weaker that they only partly lit up the darkness at long intervals.

“Since night is here,” suggested Hillson, “it is a good time to start a camp fire.”

“The idea isn’t bad,” replied Palmer, setting to work to help carry out the advice.

The rude shelter proved all they could wish. Not a drop of moisture reached man or animal, and the fuel, therefore, was in the best condition. It required only a few minutes, when a cheery blaze was kindled against the back wall and its rays were thrown far out in the surrounding gloom, revealing the couple and their horses with the distinctness of mid-day.

They had brought a lunch with them, though it would be supposed that in such a fine hunting country they ought to have been able to rely on their own marksmanship.

“It strikes me,” remarked Hillson, while the two ate their bread and cold meat, “that that mutton ought to be palatable. The big-horn did not depart this life in the fashion we would have preferred, but it ought not to make much difference, after all.”

“It is easy enough to find out,” replied Palmer, “for the body isn’t far off.”

Without catching up his rifle, the younger

sprang to his feet and walked out in the gorge. The darkness was so profound that he could not see a half-dozen feet from him, but he knew the spot so well that he was confident of making his way to it without hesitation; but in case he went astray, he could strike a match to guide him aright.

The moment he disappeared Lieutenant Palmer set to work getting things ready for broiling the meat, which he was confident would prove toothsome to a degree.

“It will give us the kind of meal to relish, for Hillson is as hungry as I am, and I am so hungry I cannot be any hungrier; there is nothing like this bracing mountain air to give a fellow an appetite that is unknown in the effete civilization of the East——”

He sprang to his feet as if shot, for at that moment the cry of the plucky Hillson rang out with startling distinctness:

“Quick, Palmer! your gun! don’t lose a second!”

CHAPTER V.

STIRRING TIMES.

LIEUTENANT HILLSON cannot be blamed for leaving the camp fire in the dark gorge for such a brief walk without carrying his loaded Winchester with him. He had hunted often enough in the Bear Paw Mountains to know that wild men and animals were liable to put in an appearance at the most inopportune times, but the oldest frontiersman would have done just as he did under the circumstances.

He left the camp fire, as will be remembered, to secure a portion of the carcass of the big-horn that committed suicide a short time before. The spot was not far off, and he made his way with considerable confidence, but when he halted at the place where he supposed it to be, he was disappointed.

When his eyes became accustomed to the gloom he was able to see perhaps eight or ten

feet from him. He was hesitating whether to try the effect of a match held over his head or to return to the fire for a brand, when he was started by a low cavernous growl, not in front, but directly behind him.

Turning his head like a flash, he saw outlined against the blazing camp fire the form of the most gigantic grizzly bear on which his eyes had ever rested.

The lieutenant comprehended the situation at once. He had passed by the carcass of the big-horn, to which Old Ephraim had been attracted, and the monster paid no attention to him until he began groping for the meat. This brought him so near the bear that the latter was angered, and, ceasing his feast for a moment, proceeded to attack the lieutenant with vigor.

It was at this juncture that Hillson called for re-enforcements, and the startled Palmer caught up his rifle and dashed to his help.

The latter was under an almost fatal disadvantage for the space of a few seconds. He had been engaged in preparing the fire for broiling the mutton which he expected his

companion to bring to the spot in the course of a few minutes. The glare of the blaze and coals in his eyes made him literally blind when he wheeled and ran to the aid of Hillson.

Since the younger officer was further out in the gorge than either his friend or the bear, the movements of the two were plainly shown against the background of the fire. Hillson could hardly expect to know the curious danger in which Palmer was placed because of the glare in his eyes, but he was astonished when he saw him run straight toward the bear without raising his rifle to fire.

The fact was Palmer could not see the brute, though the latter and Hillson saw him plainly.

“Look out!” called his friend, beginning to suspect something was wrong; “he’ll have you!”

Palmer was on the point of stopping, when his foot struck one of the bowlders, and in stumbling he was forced to drop his rifle to save himself from injury.

“Confound it!” he called, “I can’t see

anything, Hillson ; get your gun and give him a shot ! ”

Hillson would have been eager to do this had not the appeal of his friend frightened him. If he should run to camp, now some distance off, the grizzly was likely to kill Palmer before he could return. The true course, it would seem, was to secure the gun of Palmer and use that upon him. Meanwhile, each had his revolver at command.

Drawing the latter weapon (in which it must be confessed he had little faith), Hillson opened on the monster, more with the hope of frightening him off than of doing him any harm. At the same time, with the aid of the light from the camp fire, he saw that Palmer had fallen to the ground. He knew, however, that such being the case was no evidence that he had lost his self-command, unless he had been stunned by the mishap.

The grizzly was pushing things. Those vast creatures, when once roused, fear nothing on earth. He was quietly banqueting on mountain mutton when he perceived the figure of a man passing by in the gloom. The brute was

ready to receive him, but inasmuch as he continued on, he did not think it worth while to stop his feasting to dispose of him.

But when Hillson, not satisfied with being left alone, turned about and approached, the grizzly raised his bloody snout from the meal and warned him off by his growl. The brute might have suspended hostilities had not a second intruder put in an appearance at this juncture with a gun. That was too much, and, as has already been shown, the grizzly went for the second arrival with a vim and vigor that could not have been surpassed.

Like the ordinary black bear, he rose partly on his hanches, and reached out his beam-like paws to gather the young officer to his embraces, when the latter stumbled and went forward on his hands and knees.

Palmer showed a quickness of resource which would have done credit to a veteran frontiersman, for, knowing the imminence of his peril, he avoided the fatal mistake of rising directly to his feet. Instead of that, he rolled to the right with the quickness of an acrobat,

and, turning on his hands, held a crouching posture until he could run several paces before standing upright.

This was quick work, but it compelled him to give up his gun, for had he stopped to grope around for that, the mountainous body would have descended upon him like an avalanche.

Palmer did not forget, too, that his pistol was with him ; for, while Hillson was popping away, he joined in the fusillade, which became of the liveliest character, though it served no more as a deterrent than a bombardment of pebbles.

“Why don't you use your Winchester?” called Hillson, thinking his friend had forgotten himself for the moment.

“I haven't got it to use ; I think the bear is going to open fire with it.”

Understanding from this that the brute was too near the weapon for it to be recovered just then, Hillson made a dash for the camp fire to secure his own, calling to his friend to retreat in the same direction until matters took better form for them.

No time was to be lost, and the space to be travelled was so brief that Hillson was at the camp the next moment.

Matters there were not in the most pleasing shape. The horses were quick to snuff danger, probably learning of the presence of the grizzly as soon as did their owners. The ponies were not tied, and when Hillson looked around without seeing them, he did not need to be told what it meant. They had fled in the darkness.

“But they will be back,” he reflected, remembering how well they were trained, though he could not lose sight of the probability that they too might become involved in danger.

But the minutes were too precious to give any thought to them. Palmer had changed places with Hillson, and himself was in urgent need of re-enforcements.

There was one fact in favor of the young officers—the grizzly was not in need of additional supper, though his enormous capacity in the eating line would have enabled him to use one of the West Pointers as a dessert to the main meal upon the big-horn and wolf.

The fact that such a tempting carcass awaited him on the ground, only a few feet away, somewhat restrained his fierceness, else Lieutenant Palmer might not have escaped so easily after his fall in front of the brute.

A number of the pistol shots must have struck him, and they roused the dormant fury of his nature. He felt the smarts, and could not fail to know that the young men near him were the guilty ones.

The flashing of the weapons and their sharp reports, almost in his eyes, bewildered him slightly, though they could not divert his attack. He had set out to make mince meat of Lieutenant Palmer of the United States Army, and he allowed no other business to turn him aside.

By the time this curious pursuit had fairly begun, Palmer was fast regaining his eyesight. Everyone knows that the pupil of the eye quickly accommodates itself to the violent contrasts of light and darkness, though it cannot do so instantaneously.

It would have required a nimble man to elude the grizzly when the advantages were

equal, but the fugitive was better placed than his pursuer.

A friendly boulder was turned to good account by Palmer, who deftly interposed it between him and his cumbrous foe. The latter, in his eagerness to reach him, tried to clamber over the obstruction. The clatter of his immense nails against the flinty surface gave the young officer a vivid idea of what his fate would be if the huge brute but once got him in his power.

He had emptied his revolver into him with no effect other than that already named. The animal's wrath was intensified, and he pushed his assault like a giant blinded by his own fury.

Palmer did not dare resort to a direct flight, for the bear could travel faster than he—his only hope being that of dodging him until Hillson brought his Winchester into play. It seemed to him the lieutenant was a long while in getting into action, but the seconds are unusually long at such times, and the gloom kept his friend from using his weapon until sure of not injuring Palmer himself.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CAMP FIRE IN THE GORGE.

THE situation was peculiar. So long as Lieutenant Hillson could hold the bear and Palmer between him and the camp fire, he was able to distinguish their movements with tolerable accuracy, but, in the furious pursuit and flight, this could not continue. Besides, Hillson was in a state of terror lest his companion, through some slip or mishap, should be seized before he could interpose.

Matters were going with a rush, and the impetuosity of Hillson brought about the very misfortune he dreaded for the other. He came down to a walk and, believing he saw a chance for a fair shot, raised his Winchester, and was in the act of sighting when he caught his foot under a flat stone and fell headlong before he could check himself.

The rifle was not only discharged, but it was knocked from his hand, so that his fall was

the same as the one which overtook Palmer a few minutes before.

“Confound it!” he muttered, “it seems as if the fates are against us.”

“Take better aim next time!” called Palmer; “your bullet nipped my cheek, and don’t wait so long, for this is getting warm.”

Fortunately the rifle had fallen within reach, and, before rising, Hillson had it in his hands again. He saw the grizzly only a short way off, and, balancing himself on one knee, he took careful aim and pulled the trigger.

But no answering report followed. To his dismay he found that the weapon had been so injured by the fall that it was useless. But for that he was confident he would have brought down the beast with a single ball. Hoping he was mistaken, he tried again, but in vain.

“My gun is broken,” he called to his friend; “work your way back to camp, for I can’t help you!”

“Get there ahead of me,” replied Palmer, “and try fire on him.”

Hillson followed the suggestion on the

instant. He dashed to the burning fagots, dropped his gun, quickly drew out a torch, and circling it above his head, fanned it into a vigorous blaze.

This was done on the run, as may be said, for he did not stop the vigorous circling until he was almost upon the brute. The glare of the torch gave him enough light to save his falling while in such haste.

He could not have arrived more opportunely. Palmer was almost exhausted, and he had had more than one escape which could not have been narrower. Once, he actually felt the tip of a long claw against his face, and he repeated the prayer that had been on his lips more than once since being pressed so hard.

Hillson took all possible chances, and halting, jammed the flaming torch almost into the eyes of the grizzly. This was a terror which neither he nor any quadruped can stand. It did that which the Winchesters could not be made to do. It frightened him into a sullen withdrawal, leaving the young officers safe for the time.

As soon as it was seen that he had retreated,

though he was likely to return to the attack at any moment, Palmer made a break for the camp fire, calling to Hillson to do the same. The latter was but a moment behind him.

Before speaking, the elder threw a lot of fuel on the flames, which quickly spread until their glare reached far out in the gorge, showing numerous boulders and rocks, though the grizzly was beyond the circle of illumination.

“I say, Hillson,” said the panting lieutenant, “what is your opinion of hunting grizzly bears?”

Hillson looked behind him to make sure the particular specimen which had caused all this rumpus was not within sight, before replying:

“Well, when you get fairly into it, things are apt to move lively.”

“That’s the hottest game of hide and seek I ever played; I can’t understand, even now, how I managed to dodge him so long.”

“It must have been because of his size; I don’t believe there is a bigger bear in the whole West; had he been smaller he would have been nimble enough to nail me at first, and then serve you the same way.”

“I wonder whether he will bother us any more,” said Palmer, peering into the gloom; “I don’t see anything of him.”

“He may come nosing around, but the fire is our salvation; he can’t stand that, and it’s mighty lucky that we collected enough fuel to last us through the night.”

“I hope he won’t get at the horses, for they are not far off; one would think that the carcasses of the big-horn and wolf would give him abundant supper without demolishing a pony.”

“He’s big enough to devour both,” was the disgusted remark of Hillson; “and, when we had the best chance in the world to bag the monarch of all grizzlies, we must have that awkward blunder with both our guns; it’s too bad.”

He picked up his rifle as he spoke, and with a furtive glance or two behind him, examined it by the light of the camp fire. He found, to his consternation, that it could never be used again until repaired. The spring was broken. It could easily be put in shape by the ordnance department at the fort, but so far as

present purposes were concerned, it was of no more account than a walking cane.

“Mine is all right,” remarked Palmer, after the extent of the injury was seen, “but it is lost and will stay lost till daybreak.”

“I think we can find it with the help of a torch, for you know where you dropped it.”

“I am not sure of that,” said Palmer doubtfully; “the old fellow stirred me up so much that I hadn’t much chance of keeping track of my latitude and longitude.”

“It’s worth trying, anyway; I shan’t be satisfied till I’ve closed accounts with that grizzly.”

Palmer went with him, and, after standing still a minute or two to decide, as well as he could, the right direction, he pointed it out and his friend moved cautiously forward, swinging the torch at intervals over his head.

“This is quite near the spot, though I may be wrong.”

Holding the light aloft, they peered into the illuminated space with a keenness which would have revealed a pocket-knife lying on the ground; but the rifle was nowhere in sight.

While looking for that which they were so anxious to find, they kept a sharp look-out also for that which they had no wish to discover. The bear could not be far off, and the prospects of stumbling over him, even with the torch as a protection, was not coveted by either.

The search was not without its amusing features. Palmer kept so close to his companion that he sometimes interfered with his progress, his theory being that, inasmuch as the blazing fagot was their only protection, it should be equally shared.

“Quick!” suddenly whispered the elder; “the torch is going out.”

Hillson realized the alarming fact as quickly as his friend, and swung the stick with might and main. The fact was it had already burned itself so nearly out that not enough body was left to feed the flame. The efforts to renew it were useless.

“*There he comes!*” cried out Palmer, scrambling for the camp with the terrified Hillson tumbling over him.

It is safe to say that despite the speed made

on their former essays in the same direction, this surpassed them all. No one could have made the passage quicker than they.

“I should have said,” remarked Palmer, as the two looked in each other’s faces and laughed, “that the bear was likely to be coming; I was not strictly correct in declaring that he had started and was on the way.”

“Much allowance must be made for a fellow half scared to death.”

“I was impressed with *that* truth when you first yelled for me to go to your help,” replied Palmer.

But both could afford to make merry over their misadventure, for, though it had not resulted very creditably to themselves, they were lucky to escape without wounds or injury.

They decided that it was imprudent to make any further hunt for the gun until daylight. The situation was not pleasant, since they would be forced to spend the night with no fire-arms besides their revolvers, which amounted to little against a bear of the size and strength of the one with which they had

collided. They were not without hope that the grizzly would be found in the vicinity when the sun rose, and they could make a more scientific hunt for him.

The only thing that remained to do was to see that the fire burned briskly until morning. So long as that protection existed, they had nothing to fear from the bear, nor indeed from any other wild beast disposed to make them a call.

The matter was easily arranged. Hillson agreed to stand guard until one o'clock, when he would arouse his companion and they would exchange places. It was so easy for either to hold his senses for a few hours, that no fear was felt of falling asleep. The true course would have been for the sentinel to continue walking back and forth in front of the flames, pausing only when it was necessary to throw wood upon them. This would have insured perfect protection; but since the watch was to be quite equally divided, neither felt any misgiving of the consequences.

The officers had brought a blanket apiece, but unfortunately they were strapped behind

the saddles of their horses, which had not been removed before the grizzly interfered with the arrangements. However, the warmth reflected from the flinty wall behind the flames, that were kept going vigorously, was strong enough to ward off the chill, which otherwise would have been too great to admit of sleeping with comfort.

A quantity of the dried branches and drift-wood was adjusted so as to make a fair couch for Palmer, who managed to get himself into an easy posture, after which he bade his friend good-night, instructing him to call him on time to take his place as sentinel.

Hillson waited for some minutes after all was still, when he pronounced the name of the other several times. Receiving no reply, he concluded he was asleep and gave him no further thought. His watch showed that it was only a few minutes past nine, and he had a long, wearisome wait before him, but he preferred that it should come during the first instead of the latter part of the night.

“We have done this thing before,” was his thought, “and we ought to understand it.”

The scene was impressive to the last degree. The darkness was profound, and from his place on the ground he could see nothing that lay outside the circle of illumination of the the camp fire. Looking upward at the sky spanning the gloomy gorge, he observed a single star shining from the heavenly arch which was not yet freed from the clouds that had drenched the earth.

From some point, deeper in the mountains, came the wail of a wild animal, rising and falling on the stillness with a dismal, weird effect which caused Hillson to fling more wood on the flames and to look at his revolver, which he held ready for instant use. A gentle wind at times soughed through the ravine, the peculiar tunnel-like passage giving it a softened roar like that of the ocean when it reaches the ear through the miles of intervening forest.

Now and then the lieutenant started and glanced apprehensively into the very blackness of darkness, fancying he detected the elephantine form of the grizzly with whom they had held their stirring interview earlier in the

evening. Hillson edged a little nearer the fire, his chivalry for his friend causing him to maintain the blaze as near him as it could be done without discomfort.

But, though he used his keen vision at its best, he saw nothing of their dreaded foe, nor did the first cavernous growl show that he was anywhere near.

“He may be lurking out there,” thought Hillson, “but we have only to stay close to the fire to be safe. After the experience Palmer and I have had we can’t forget to do that, but,” he added with a look of perplexity, “it seems to me there is something strange about that roar that has been in my ears so long.”

CHAPTER VII.

THE MOUNTAIN FLOOD.

WE have referred to a dull roaring sound which resembled that of the distant ocean. It had been heard by the officers from the time they had dismounted to go into camp in this lonely place, and at first they gave little heed to it.

But Lieutenant Hillson was mystified by the fact that the sound was increasing, not only steadily but with unmistakable rapidity. He could not understand what it meant, and yet it was strange that the nature of the approaching peril was not suspected from the first.

“It may be a cyclone or hurricane cavorting among the mountains above us,” he thought; “and, if so, we have nothing to fear, for no cyclone that ever desolated a country can overturn *our* house.”

And he looked upward at the vast mass of stone arching out over them, and felt that it

must stand until the last great day, unless displaced by some convulsion of nature such as originally split the mountain range apart.

But the explanation suggested by Hillson to himself could not satisfy him. He rose to his feet and walked a few paces into the gorge, taking care to keep within the light from the camp fire, and, standing thus, he looked and listened.

Eyesight was of no use at such a time, and for a while the ear was unable to interpret the uproar, swelling rapidly into an overwhelming volume of sound.

He was becoming alarmed. It seemed as if the cool autumn air was taking upon itself a greater degree of cold in which there was a marked dampness. He was inclined to awaken Palmer, who might be able to tell what it meant, but he asked himself in what possible way it could threaten either, and why he should break the slumber of his friend, who needed the rest.

This uneasiness increased, until he abruptly stepped to where Palmer was lying and shook his shoulder.

“Wake up!” he called. “It won’t do to sleep longer.”

The elder roused on the instant, and supporting his head on his elbow, looked across in the firelight.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“I can’t tell, but something strange is going on; do you hear that roar?”

“I should say I did,” replied Palmer, springing to his feet; “what does it mean?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to figure out, but can’t.”

The two stood beside each other for a full minute without speaking or stirring. Meanwhile the alarming sound deepened until it resembled the sweep of a strong wind through a great forest. Palmer had noticed the increasing chilliness in the air, and referred to it as ominous. The wind was rising, too; this added to their alarm.

“I don’t know why we need have any fear,” said the elder, whose words and manner were not those of a man who felt secure; “for it cannot be anything that will disturb us.”

“If it did not grow louder so fast I would

be sure it was a strong gale in the woods above us, but——”

“Hillson,” interrupted the other, catching his arm, “*that sounds like water!*”

“So it is, Palmer! Great Heaven, we are doomed!”

“So we are! a stream like Niagara is sweeping down this gorge upon us!”

The couple might well stand appalled, for there was no longer a doubt of the meaning of the fearful roar which was now swelled to an overpowering volume. A prodigious torrent was charging down the gorge with resistless momentum. No human power could withstand it, and there was no refuge whither they might fly.

The mountain trail was a mile away, and had they been borne by a lightning express, they could not have reached the outlet ahead of that awful rush of waters. The walls of rock rose on either side for hundreds of feet, and they were without the means of scaling their perpendicular faces, even had they possessed precious minutes sufficient to reach the top.

But they confronted their fate like the young heroes they were, displaying a coolness that could not have been surpassed.

“It’s no use trying to fight the torrent,” said Hillson, “but we can make some preparation.”

Palmer knew what he meant, and instantly began throwing off his surplus clothing, even to his hat, though they retained their shoes. No attempt was made to save the single Winchester within reach, though each retained his revolver, whose weight was too slight to affect them one way or the other.

“When it comes, we will simply go with it and trust to Heaven to save us.”

“Of course we will *go with it*,” grimly replied the elder, “for how can we help doing so?”

The fire still burned vigorously, the blaze, fanned by the strong wind which rushed down the ravine ahead of the torrent, producing a perceptible effect. In the hope that it might be safer near the middle of the gorge than at the sides, they hastily moved thither, until they were so far out as to be only dimly

visible to each other in the faint light of the camp fire.

The brave youths formed a dramatic picture as they stood side by side in the gloom of the gorge, dimly outlined in the yellow light beneath the shelving rocks beyond them, as it was fanned by the gale sweeping down the ravine. Their hair was blown about their temples; for, like the soldier condemned to death by shooting, they resolutely looked into the face of the approaching peril, as though they welcomed their fate, even when it came in such terrible form.

For a few seconds neither spoke. The reader must bear in mind that events were sweeping past with hurricane swiftness. Somewhere up in the mountains beyond, the tremendous rainfall of the evening had gathered and accumulated until, like that reservoir suspended so long over the doomed Pennsylvania valley, it burst all barriers and rushed downward, carrying destruction and death in its trail.

Had they but taken warning of the peril to which they were exposed as long as they

stayed in the gorge, after the fall of the rain in the mountains, they might have escaped by fleeing with all haste down the ravine to the narrow passage where they left the mountain trail ; but the fear never entered the thoughts of either, until long after all hope in that direction was cut off.

“ Good-by, Russ ! ”

“ Good-by, Al, old boy ! ”

The two clasped hands, the warm palms tightly closed, as if each instinctively felt that it was the last time the loving greeting could ever be known between them.

And they stood thus in affectionate embrace when the awful avalanche of water came !

CHAPTER VIII.

WITH THE TORRENT.

THE brief farewell, in the words given, was all that passed between Lieutenants Hillson and Palmer, but, though neither had said anything to that effect, each was resolved to hold fast to the hand of the other in the final struggle with death that was upon them.

They might as well have tried to ride upon the cyclone, for at the first smiting of the appalling torrent they were swept apart as if by the explosion of a bomb between their feet. The fire, which up to that moment permitted them to see faintly each other's forms, was extinguished and all was blank darkness.

Both of the young men were powerful swimmers, and their acts were instinctively the best that could have taken place. The instant they felt the water upon them they drew in a deep respiration, and, refraining from wasting their

strength by fighting the current, tried hard to keep their heads above the surface.

It was at this crisis that each heard, above the frightful rush and roar, a sound such as never struck upon their ears before, and such as, it is safe to say, they could never hear again. It was the cry of the grizzly bear when he felt himself in the grasp of death, for which he cared naught in any other form. The hoarse, rasping shriek, with tremendous depth and volume, was fearful enough to impress itself upon both youths, at the moment they believed brought their own last struggle.

Lieutenant Palmer was as helpless in the rush as a feather in the maelstrom below Niagara. He knew he was borne down the ravine with a speed which, if it should dash him against the rocky sides, would instantly kill him. It may be said that, after finding he was not overwhelmed and drowned by the first rush, he expected to lose his life in this way.

Possibly it was fortunate for Palmer and his friend that the first contact of the water was of such prodigious volume that they were

lifted bodily from the ground and borne to a height of fifty feet above it, for, had it been less, they could not have escaped being dashed against some one of the many rocks and bowlders at the bottom of the ravine. As it was, they were carried above these obstructions, though the danger from the sides was as great, if not greater, than before.

It was a desperately fierce struggle for a few minutes. Palmer caught his breath as he could, and, more often than otherwise, water instead of air streamed down his throat, and had to be coughed out again. Leaves, sticks, branches, whole trees, bark, and every imaginable product of the mountain forests were around and about him, but since all were borne forward with the same rush and at comparatively the same speed, the danger of collision with these objects was slight.

It was no difficult matter for the lieutenant, when he found himself on the surface, to sustain himself there, but since his outstretched hands struck a large tree bobbing along on the torrent, he was only simply prudent when he threw one arm over it with the

conclusion that it might as well sustain him as to drift uselessly downward.

At the moment of doing this Lieutenant Palmer, for the first time, asked himself :

“Is it among the possibilities that I shall ever live to tell of this? Alas, poor Russ!”

Now that the first gleam of hope for himself appeared, his thoughts turned to his friend from whom he was wrenched with such suddenness that they had time to utter only the simple words of farewell. He gave no thought to the ponies, for they were of little account, but he wondered whether the manly Hillson was still alive and battling for life.

“I see no reason why he should not have been as fortunate as I,” he reflected, “for he is a better swimmer and must have encountered but the same difficulties.”

It was not strange perhaps that he recalled an incident somewhat similar which occurred at one of the Southern forts not long before. The captain and first lieutenant were overwhelmed in the same manner by a sudden rush of waters while hunting in the mountains and both were drowned. The noticeable point

was that by one of those curious complications which sometimes take place in the army, the two who lost their lives were the couple standing immediately ahead of the second lieutenant in line of promotion. He nearly lost his own life in the effort to save the officers, but failed and was soon rewarded by being made captain.

Now that hope was awakened in the breast of Lieutenant Palmer, and his sympathies were stirred for his late companion, he could not avoid speculating as to what the end of all this was to be. At such a time one thinks rapidly, and there was hardly a possible phase of the fearful dilemma that did not present itself to him.

The first truth which impressed him was that this mighty volume of water could not be driven through the fissure-like cut by which he and Hillson entered the wild region. That was so exceedingly strait that it must become choked and a back current formed. How would that affect him? Could he keep out of the fissure through which it must be forced, as if from the throat of a gigantic hose, long

enough to help himself? If caught resistlessly in it, he knew he would shoot over and across the mountain trail as if fired from the mouth of a columbiad. Such an experience in all the elements of terror would surpass the experience of the fool-hardy Captain Webb, who essayed the impossible.

But was there not another outlet to this flood? He recalled that, for some distance after leaving the mountain path, the trend of the fissure was downward, but he and Hillson saw no passage or larger chasm connecting with the one leading into the mountains.

And yet it might exist and escape their notice, for their eyes were always fixed in advance, and a wide-throated ravine could join this one in such a manner that it was prominent only when they were facing the other way.

This seemed like a violent presumption, but after all, it was reasonable enough to set his thoughts in that direction.

However, the question of life and death must soon be determined. The prodigious speed with which he was borne forward was sure to

bring him to the mountain trail in a few moments or bear him along the diverging torrent.

Incredible as it may seem, it was a fact that the outlet of this volume of rushing water was through a channel almost as broad, but connected with the ravine in such a way that it was not observed by either of the officers when riding toward the point where they made their camp for the night.

It will be remembered that the main gorge was sinuous and possessed many sharp turns in its course. It was at one of these that, instead of sweeping onward, the torrent shot into another channel, which, rightly considered, was the real continuation of the ravine, which had really been entered through a branch, as it may be termed, by our young friends.

Into this new course Lieutenant Palmer was swept with the same amazing swiftness that he had been carried along the old one. He did not suspect the truth until he had passed some distance and had actually grazed the side, the momentary touch of which first gave him an adequate idea of the bewildering speed with which he was rushing forward.

The second channel being much narrower than the first caused an instant rise of the water, a portion of which still continued along the narrower fissure in the direction of the mountain trail.

Nothing can give a more vivid idea of the amazing volume of water than the statement that within a minute after it passed the extinguished camp fire, it had risen to within a short distance of the top of the gorge. Not only that, but at points where the summits of the walls were depressed, it overflowed.

It followed, therefore, that after the water was driven into the narrower passage, it rose still higher, and, before Palmer dreamed of what had taken place, he was "out of the swim" altogether. That is to say, the whirling volume carried him over the top of the rocks on one side and among the bowlders and trees, where it would seem his chances of death were increased tenfold, for all manner of obstructions were now on every hand and his progress must come to an end within the briefest space of time.

CHAPTER IX.

UP A TREE.

THE first proof Lieutenant Palmer received of the unexpected change was when his foot struck the ground below him. It was what might be called a glancing blow, the contact being so slight that he could not secure an ounce's resistance.

While he was wondering whether he had touched the top of some towering rock, rising nearly to the top of the new bed of the torrent, he found himself shooting through the branches of trees.

This signified something. Those trees must have their roots imbedded in the soil, an impossibility had they been in the path of the direct rush of the waters. It followed, therefore, that he had been "spilled over" and, like a Mississippi steamer gone astray in a flood,

was skurrying over territory where nothing of the kind was ever known before.

The instant the limbs began brushing about his face, he threw out his hands and caught desperately at everything within reach. The twigs shot through his grasp with blistering speed, and, when he seized a stronger limb, it snapped off short as though it were a pipestem.

He was now in terror of being dashed to death against the trunk of some tree. When the next instant he was among the branches of other trees, he repeated his efforts with such vigor that he held fast. The strain was intense, but it meant life or death and he did not let go.

The moment his forward motion was checked, he lifted himself so strongly by the hands that his feet were drawn clear of the rushing current and he was perched above its reach.

“Thank God!” was his fervent exclamation, now realizing that at last he was saved; “it is a miracle, but it is real.”

The tense strain being lifted, Lieutenant Palmer was able, for the first time, to remove his thoughts from the immediate present to

the immediate future. He had done a vast deal of guessing and speculating while in the torrent, but he was in constant danger of sudden death, and it was that fact which dominated all others.

It was clear to him what had occurred. The time spent in the water suggested that the torrent had turned into a new channel, since the speed with which he was carried downward ought to have taken him to the mountain trail before this. That new bed had so narrowed that the impetuous water rose quickly and Palmer had been carried over and outside of the banks from which at one time there seemed to be no possible hope of effecting his escape.

He reasoned further that this flood in all its characteristics was very like the breaking away of some reservoir; it was mighty and overwhelming, but must soon subside, since the source of supply was exhausted. The rain had ceased falling a long time before, and probably, in the course of a few hours, the immense gorge would be so freed that the ride of the horsemen might be repeated, were other circumstances favorable.

There could be no great depth of water below him, and ere long the ground must be uncovered, and it would be safe for him to descend. He decided, however, not to do so before daylight, since he was liable to make a misstep in the darkness, with no chance of helping himself.

The situation could not have been more discomfoting, but he was mighty glad to exchange it with that of a few minutes before. It seemed to him the tree was not very tall nor large, but after a while he succeeded in securing a position much better than before.

If any person wants to realize how slowly the minutes and hours can drag by, let him place himself in a situation something like that of Lieutenant Palmer. He was clothed scantily, the water was chilly, and, now that he was deprived of all exercise, it seemed he must be chilled through and perish before he could help himself.

His matches were carried in a small rubber safe, and his revolver was so protected that its submersion was not likely to affect it in the

least. He therefore possessed the power to strike a light whenever he wished.

“It seems to me I have been here about a month,” he muttered after shifting his position, which quickly became unbearably cramped, “but it can hardly be as long as that,” he grimly added, as he began fishing out the little safe.

It required no little care and skill to ignite the bit of pine, but he succeeded, and held it in front of his watch. Then he muttered an exclamation of amazement.

It lacked a few minutes of ten o'clock!

“Heavens, that is impossible! I thought so.”

He placed the timepiece against his ear and found it had ceased ticking.

“It must have been stopped by the first rush of water,” was his conclusion, as he returned it to its place at his waist, “and that surely was hours and hours ago.”

For some minutes a suspicion had been growing upon the young officer that he was not the only one in the branches of the tree. The wild thought that Hillson might have

reached the refuge first caused him to pronounce his name several times, but he was almost ashamed the next moment of having done so.

He had forgotten the impression while working with the tiny match, but no sooner had the twist of flame shone over the polished face of the watch than a warning growl from some of the limbs proved that his fears were well founded.

“If you are only peaceable,” said Palmer, dropping the point of flame among the limbs below, “I won’t bother you, but you may as well understand that, after such a trip as I have made, I’m ready to fight every inch of the way hereafter, whether it is an elephant, a tiger, or a treacherous Indian that crosses my path.”

He believed that a wild animal—most probably of the panther variety—had been carried by a strange chance to the same refuge that had interposed to save him. No doubt the brute was terrified for the time out of its natural fierceness, though ere long it would be ready to resume business at the old stand.

The growl came from some point above and

not far off, and caused the officer to reach for his revolver, for he was liable to be assailed at any moment.

The growl was followed by occasional purring mutterings which enabled him to decide the exact spot where the beast was crouching. It was on a limb hardly ten feet above his head, and far enough away and around to require an elevation of some forty-five degrees to reach it with a shot.

Palmer reflected that his position could not be worse, for an easy jump on the part of the wild beast must bring it directly down on his shoulders, and he was in no condition to engage in a fight of that kind. That the animal would make such an attack he did not doubt, and it would seem, therefore, that the best thing was to anticipate it.

He tried for several minutes to gain a sight of its eyes, so as to aim with some certainty of hitting it, but he failed to obtain the first glimpse, and though he knew the very place where it was crouching, he dared not take the chances of firing without more conditions in his favor.

The first thing to be done was to change his own position. He was quite near the trunk of the tree, and, carefully rising to his feet, he shifted slowly around so as to interpose the trunk between him and the brute.

The instant he began the movement his enemy renewed its growling with such vigor that he was sure it was gathering itself to spring. He held his weapon ready to fire, but the leap was not made, and, balancing himself with one foot on the right and the other on the left, the latter resting on a limb some inches higher than the other, Palmer placed one arm around the trunk opposite his shoulders, and felt that his situation was excellent. He was behind ramparts, and, though the beast might reach him with his sharp claws, there was a chance of using the revolver effectively.

It was at this juncture that Palmer, while peering cautiously around the right of the trunk, caught the greenish phosphorescent glitter of the animal's eyes. It was only for a moment, the head shifting so quickly that they instantly vanished.

He pointed the weapon at the place, but held his fire, waiting for another display.

It came a minute later, when the shifting head revealed the peculiar gleam of the round eyes. At such a time, when Palmer could not see his upraised hand, of course he could do nothing in the nature of sighting his weapon ; but his familiarity with its use enabled him to point the chambers as accurately as though the sun were shining.

At the same instant that the greenish flash was observed, he let fly with two charges in quick succession.

There could be no doubt that he hit the brute, for the snarling yelp which instantly escaped it was as much of pain as anger. Without a second's hesitation it bounded downward and straight at its assailant, who would have been torn but for the interposing tree trunk.

He heard it fiercely clawing and clutching at the limbs in the effort to sustain itself, and, by way of helping matters, he pumped a couple more balls into the body. The struggles and outcries were redoubled, but the beast

could not sustain itself. It dropped downward through the few remaining limbs, striking the water with a splash, without having harmed a shred of the young man's scanty clothing.

All this was a source of congratulation, but that which pleased him the most was what immediately followed on the fall of the brute. The instant it landed it hastily left the spot, but instead of doing so by swimming it trotted off.

CHAPTER X.

AIMLESS WANDERINGS.

THE patter of the animal's feet as it trotted away from the foot of the tree proved that the water had become very shallow. Indeed, its depth could not have been more than a few inches, as was shown by the ease with which the brute travelled.

“I shall soon have solid land under me,” thought Palmer, “and all that I can pray is that Hillson has been as fortunate as I.”

The flow was plainly heard, and he was sure, from its peculiar noise, that it was falling rapidly. Clearly all danger from that source was at an end.

But the lieutenant was in a pitiable condition. He was shivering with cold, and his limbs were so cramped that more than once he was in danger of losing his hold and falling to

the ground. In fact, he was tempted to do so, for any change was preferable to that in the tree.

But while he was debating with himself what was best to do, he was thrilled by a growing light in one portion of the sky. He had been disappointed so often that he feared it was only another delusion. Looking long and earnestly at the spot, he fancied he was mistaken ; but, when he turned his gaze in another direction for some minutes, and then brought it back to the former place, all doubts were removed. Day was breaking.

The next gratifying discovery came when the light was strong enough to give him a sight of the ground below. While the leaves and grass were wet, the water was gone ; there was not so much as a rivulet flowing. The prodigious reservoir was rapidly exhausting itself, if it had not already done so.

At the same moment he learned this cheering fact he let himself down from the limbs, landing lightly on his feet, and looked about him. By the rapidly increasing light he saw he had been carried among a group of trees of much

less extent than he supposed. He shuddered on noting that several had been uprooted by the torrent, which had flung great bowlders against them with tremendous force.

It was easy to trace the course of the flow, and he had to go little more than a hundred yards when he reached the edge of the ravine from which he was carried by the friendly overflow.

He was astonished beyond measure to find that that was also substantially free from water. Muddy pools were here and there, while trees, branches, and overturned bowlders lay in many places, but there was no defined flow of the torrent, which hours before had poured through the ravine with a rush and volume which of necessity speedily drained dry its source.

He stood for some minutes gazing over the edge of the gorge with strange thoughts stirring his heart. He could not help recalling the fearful experience of the night before, when, with his hand clasping that of Hillson, the awful fury of the flood tore them apart, with not a hope in the heart of either that they

would ever look upon each other's face, or hear each other's voice again.

He mourned him as one mourns a true and noble friend, but his own situation demanded every attention.

He was so chilled that the first thing he did was to run rapidly back and forth, swinging his arms and leaping in the air, to restore his circulation. This was kept up with such vigor for several minutes that his system was thrown into a glow and he felt much better.

“What would I not give for an army blanket?” he said, panting from his exertion; “it is enough to tempt a fellow to duplicate his pay accounts to get one.”

The sensation of hunger was strong, but he had learned how to bear that uncomplainingly during his campaigning on the frontier. The most obvious course was for him to locate himself as soon as he could, and then to set out on his return to the fort, many a weary mile away.

He knew there were Indians, some of them vagrant and dangerous, in these mountains, but he would have welcomed the risk could he

have caught sight of the smoke of one of their camp fires, but his vision was not gratified by the first sign of a human being's presence in the neighborhood.

Since it was out of his power to cross the gorge, while it was not certain his situation would be improved thereby, he picked his way along the sides, keeping it in sight at all times, though the roughness of the journey compelled him to advance with the utmost care.

While he was wondering where the torrent of water had found its outlet, the overpowering answer burst upon him.

The gorge, after one of its violent turns, entered an underground passage whose mouth, a hundred feet wide and almost as high, was like the gateway to some vast subterranean cavern, into which it seemed the Mississippi might have lost itself.

For several rods in front of this vast tunnel the bottom was so depressed that a pond of motionless water lay, muddy, full of leaves, trees, and vegetation.

The lieutenant shuddered as he reflected that but for that sudden and fortunate over-

flow, he would have been swept into those fearful depths, from which no man or animal could emerge alive.

“That is the tomb of Hillson and the ponies,” he reflected, weighed down with unspeakable sadness; “the torrent may flow for many miles underground before reaching its outlet in some of the rivers, and it is not likely that his body will ever be seen or heard of again.”

Inasmuch as the ravine had been entered from the other side, he crossed the arch of the tunnel and pushed his journey in that direction. The ground was so rough, covered with pines and undergrowth, that travelling was of the hardest nature, while the towering mountains behind him and the scarcely less precipitous slopes and elevations along which he was obliged to make his way shut off his view on every hand.

The position of the sun, however, gave great help. It appeared to rise in the south, but he was sensible enough to understand his mistake, and he headed toward the fort, greatly relieved to find that, while following the

ravine, his course was favorable almost from the first.

His aim now was to reach the mountain trail which he and his friend left the afternoon before, little dreaming of what was to follow. This attained, he would be able to locate himself without trouble, for, as has been shown in another place, it served as the popular gateway to the famous hunting grounds of that section. He could not forget, however, that the ascent of the rocks to the left of the mountain trail, as they rode up it, was so steep in most places as to be insurmountable; and, that being so, he might well wonder how he should ever find his way down to it again.

But all that remained was to press vigorously onward, for, if compelled to stay long in the mountains in his present plight, he must perish. While he carried a few matches, no fire could take the place of warm clothing. The autumn was advancing, and in that northern climate when the autumn season does close in it is like that which the Arctic explorers encounter in the extreme northern regions.

At the end of a couple of hours Lieutenant Palmer could not see that he was any nearer his destination than before. His clothing had been torn by the briars and bushes, and he was beginning to feel the effects of his continual and laborious climbing.

“I wonder,” he said to himself, stopping for a brief breathing spell, “whether there are any Blackfeet or Gros Ventres or Piegans within call. They are not the most desirable acquaintances in these parts, but there isn’t much about me in the way of plunder to tempt them, and my revolver is still serviceable——”

The crackling of the undergrowth behind him caused the startled officer to turn his head like a flash ; and as he did so, he received the greatest surprise of his life.

CHAPTER XI.

A STRANGE TUG.

WE are quite sure the reader will admit that Lieutenant Palmer passed through a stirring experience, and that his escape from death was as wonderful in many respects as some of those that marked the Johnstown disaster which appalled the civilized world.

But by one of those marvellous complications which seem to defy the laws of chances and probabilities, his friend, Lieutenant Hillson, passed a night in many respects more amazing than that of the elder officer.

Palmer was right when he declared his friend to be a better swimmer than he, but no skill could avail him when caught by the resistless torrent which thundered through the mountain gorge like an Alpine avalanche. Finding his hand jerked from the grasp of his

companion, he instinctively imitated his action, and with the same result that he found himself on the surface, plunging forward in the darkness, with only a dim idea of where he was going, content to fight off death for a few minutes only.

Hillson was overtaken by a mishap which his friend escaped. A huge tree, caught in some peculiar whirl of the torrent, threw its dangling roots aloft, descending again with a violent splash. The darkness was too intense for the swimmer to see his danger, and as the trunk descended he was struck with a shock that rendered him partly senseless for a few minutes.

It was at this juncture that his skill in swimming served him well. Most persons would have drowned while suffering from the blow, but he kept his limbs moving with an expertness that saved him, while the chilly current speedily brought him back to his full senses.

He knew what it was that had struck him, and saw the chance to save his strength by using some of the *débris* to help float him, as

his friend was in reality doing at that very moment.

He had heard that frightful cry of the grizzly when overtaken by the flood, but gave it no further thought, until in groping around in the gloom both hands came in contact with something soft and yielding. He was frightened at first, but the next moment recognized it as the coat of the grizzly bear, who was swimming for dear life.

“I don’t see why *you* won’t do as well as anything else,” muttered Hillson, struck by the oddity of the situation, “so here goes!”

The head of the brute was mostly above water, the vast body sloping backward and downward, until the haunches were too far beneath to be of any service; but, just back of the shoulders was the spot which could not have been excelled as a means of support for one in the situation of the young officer. He grasped the long, glossy hair at that place, finding that so long as bruin maintained himself, his own situation was all he could wish.

“I don’t know what point you’re aiming at, Ephraim,” said Hillson, “but it’s all the same

to me, and I prefer that you should serve as my steam tug rather than to go it alone.”

For some time the grizzly gave no sign of knowing what had taken place. He was swimming powerfully, though it appeared to be aimlessly. He was forced to go with the torrent, wheresoever that bore him, and was using his immense strength with might and main.

It struck Hillson that the brute was wasting his efforts, but before long he changed his mind, for, though the *ursus* species includes the most stupid of the animal kind, it was not long before he gave proof that he was following a definite plan which did him no discredit.

In fact he was making for the side of the gorge, which in many places was within his reach. While he drifted with the current he also worked quartering, and had not struggled long when he was spinning along shore so close that he grazed the walls of rock.

At the first opportunity he reached one of his huge paws upward and struck the bank above, but the force of the water swept him past without the slightest cessation of speed.

Hillson understood what he was trying to do, and hope was at once aroused that his Samson-like strength would enable him to draw himself out of the resistless rush.

“It will delight me to have you succeed, my old enemy, but I am determined you shall not get out of the swim without taking me with you. I can't give you much help, but you may be able to do a good deal for me.”

By and by the grizzly essayed it once more, and then again and again, but with no more success than in the first instance. Possibly he might have accomplished it in one case but for his heavy handicap. Some idea of that nature must have come to him, for, after falling back in the water, he emitted one of his ugly growls and turned about in the wrathful effort to reach the fellow with his jaws.

But Hillson had been expecting this from the beginning and was on his guard. He had nothing to do but to retain his grip on the shaggy coat at the shoulders, and the brute had no power to shake him off. He tried it several times, turning entirely around more than once, but Hillson could afford to despise

his efforts, and he was not frightened in the least.

The animal himself quickly saw he could do nothing in that line, and resumed his swimming, close to the upper edge of the wall, which for some distance was beyond his reach.

However, nature was kind enough to do that which was out of the power of the grizzly. He was still clawing and scrambling in the vain effort to climb out of the water, when he went headlong over a depression below the main torrent. It was here the choked water, seeking every possible overflow, shot a portion to one side, carrying the huge beast in spite of himself. True to his resolve, Hillson clung fast, and, before he understood what was coming, found himself tumbling, half-strangled and seemingly so mixed up with the brute that, had the latter used the chance, he could have destroyed him in a twinkling.

But the grizzly just then was fighting for nobody but himself. The shallowness of the water allowed him to get upon his feet, while the lieutenant was sufficiently wise to let go before angering him into an attack. The run-

ning stream was almost to his knees, and, though it rushed past with great force, he, too, was strong enough to retain his feet.

Hillson was wise and kept his head. He knew he was still in imminent peril, and anything in the nature of undue haste or panic would be fatal. He was outside the main gorge, but still much nearer than was agreeable. A step or two to the left was likely to drop him into the foaming flood again, and, once there, he could hope for no such good fortune as had just saved his life.

Not only was the bear gone, but it might be that this overflow, after running a short distance, returned to the gorge through some still lower depression, over which he was liable to be precipitated at any moment if he took the wrong course.

But he could not stand still with the torrent rushing about his knees. With a coolness natural to him, he began working his way at right angles to the course of the smaller stream, and directly from the gorge, provided the course of the latter had not changed abruptly. This certainly was the safer pro-

ceeding, according to all reasoning, but Hillson determined, now that Heaven had given him such aid, that he would not throw away his opportunity. He stepped with as much care as that shown by an elephant when venturing upon a rickety bridge, never allowing the advanced foot to bear his weight until he knew it rested on solid foundation.

It did not take much travelling, even in this slow fashion, for him to emerge from the side stream, which had been the means of saving himself and the grizzly. He was simply seeking a firm basis for his feet, where he would be willing to stand until the light of day enabled him to make another venture for himself.

He had secured it at last, and his prayer of thankfulness was as fervent as that of Palmer when rescued from what he looked upon as certain death.

He had no means of learning how extensive was the "platform" on which he was supported, but was satisfied to know it was firm. Drawing his match safe from his pocket he managed with considerable trouble to ignite

one of the tiny torches, but it was instantly put out by the wind, which blew quite strongly. When a second effort failed, he forebore repeating it, for it occurred to him that those lucifers were likely to acquire great value to him before he was fully delivered from the labyrinth of peril in which he was entangled.

CHAPTER XII.

A FRIEND TRIED AND TRUE.

YOUNG Hillson gained a more vivid idea than ever before of playing the martyr. His situation was fully as dismal and trying as that of his old friend in the tree, but he fought off the torturing chill by leaping up and down, slapping himself, and going through more than one form of violent gymnastics. The hours were unspeakably long, but darkness fled at last, and the glorious sun once more rose over forest and mountain.

The first fact impressed upon him, after discovering that he was in a dense growth of trees at the foot-hills of a range that seemed to tower to the very clouds, was that there was no water of account nearer him than that contained in the gorge from which he had effected his escape several hours before.

The next discovery fairly took away his

breath, for only a few yards away was a horse cropping the scanty grass beneath the trees. That same horse was saddled and bridled, and hardly a second glance was required to identify it as his own pet mare, Kitty.

“How in the name of creation did *you* save yourself?” asked the delighted lieutenant, calling the name of his gallant beast.

The latter threw up her head, and recognizing him, gave a whinny of pleasure as she trotted toward him. The soldier was not ashamed to throw his arms about the neck of the beautiful animal, who pressed her silken nostrils against his cheek and showed her happiness in every way at command.

The surprise of the unexpected meeting over, the shivering lieutenant proceeded to secure the blanket strapped behind the saddle.

“It won’t be very comfortable saturated as it must be with water,” he muttered, “but it beats freezing to death a thousand per cent. Well, I’ll be hanged if that don’t get me!”

That which astonished the lieutenant anew was the fact that, when he came to unfold the precious blanket, he found it dry or nearly so,

the only moisture penetrating it being that which had struck it in the form of rain.

The result of subsequent investigations may as well be given in this place, in order that the reader may not suspect us of telling fiction for truth.

When the ponies fled from the camp at the bottom of the gorge, terrified by the appearance of the grizzly bear, they headed up the ravine, thus continuing the course they had been following from the first. Not far from the spot the gorge rapidly broadened, with such gentle slopes on the right and left that it was not difficult for any animal to make his way out of it. Had the two officers, on the first sound of the approaching flood, hastened in the same direction, they could have escaped without danger.

But the ponies were fleeing in the dark, and it was simple accident that led Kitty to climb out to the left, before her hoofs were wet by the rush of the torrent. Her companion continued in the gorge and was never seen again. Fortune was less kind to him than to his master and companion.

It may be said that Kitty had been in no danger at all, so that her escape surpassed in some respects that of the officers themselves. The dryness of her accoutrement suggested the true explanation to her owner which, as we have explained, was confirmed by subsequent investigations.

When Lieutenant Hillson wrapped himself in a heavy warm blanket, he executed a war dance, winding up with a whoop which would have done credit to a Blackfoot chieftain.

“ Ah, if Palmer was only as lucky,” he said with a sigh.

One of the best results of the officer's good fortune was the strong hope it inspired in his heart for his friend. He reasoned that if he and his mare escaped the flood, there was good grounds for believing Palmer had done equally well. True, he had no grizzly bear to land him, but Hillson believed he could manage that point without such aid.

So it came about that, while the elder was in despair over the fate of the younger, the latter was hopeful in the highest degree concerning him.

But Hillson appreciated the situation too well to waste time in rejoicings. Nothing was to be seen of the other horse, and he believed it likely that Palmer was afoot without a blanket to protect him from the cold. His first aim, therefore, was to find his companion.

He spent several minutes in figuring out, as nearly as he could, his position as to the mountain trail, which, if found, would serve him as a compass, as Palmer expected it to do in his case.

He followed a different system from his brother officer. Instead of following the course of the gorge, he turned away from it, plunging deeper into the hills and mountains. One reason for doing this was because of his mare. He could tread in many places where she could not walk, and the necessity of picking out a route for her led him through a different part of the wild region.

But the path along the mountain side was his objective point from the first, so that while the friends followed different routes their destination was the same.

In fact, the principal anxiety of Hillson was

that he would be unable to extricate his mare from the rugged section in which she was forced. He mounted, and, with his blanket wrapped around his shoulders and his black hair uncovered, might well be mistaken for a Blackfoot Indian who had been out rather late the night before and was effecting a zig-zag return to his wigwam or tepee.

Hillson had pushed his way for an eighth of a mile in this laborious fashion, when his animal stopped without word from him. She had reason for doing so, for she could penetrate no further.

“Well, Kitty,” he said with a sigh, “this is rather rough; you have done your best, but it looks as if it is love’s labor lost. The gates are closed in front and we must hunt some other path.”

Slipping from the saddle he left the animal to search for an outlet. He could not think of retracing his steps, since there was no surety of gaining anything by the act. It would have proven a strange condition of affairs if he should find himself obliged to abandon Kitty altogether.

But the wonderfully good fortune that had attended him thus far did not desert him now. He crept only a few rods among the bowlders and rocks, when, before he expected anything of the kind, he stepped into a well-worn path.

“It looks as if I were in a land of enchantment,” he said, “for everything I want or need comes to me. This trail is the only way to safety for my mare and me.”

He did not linger a minute, but, returning to where Kitty was awaiting him, began helping her forward. It was not necessary to lead her by the bridle, but at a word she began working her way after him, he carefully selecting the path for her hoofs.

It was hard work, indeed, and more than once she stumbled and fell on her side, but she was instantly up and at it again, her master cheering her with encouraging words, while a chamois could hardly have surpassed her achievement.

“Here we are, Kitty!” he exclaimed, patting her neck, when they stood in the narrow path, she directly behind him. Her handsome coat had been ruffled, and she was not

able to escape several rough bruises, but the injuries, after all, amounted to little, and she was as ready for active service as when she bore him from the fort the day before on their way to the Bear Paw Mountains.

It now occurred to Lieutenant Hillson that the trail which he was so glad to find was not likely to prove an unmixed blessing.

Since the path was there, it was proper to ascertain the reason for its existence. It must have been made either by the feet of wild animals or men. It has been stated that among these mountains were members of the various tribes of Indians, who were far different from those met at Fort Assinaboine and on the cultivated portions of the reservation. They felt little fear of the military power in those inaccessible fastnesses, where a half dozen warriors could defy the whole United States Army, as Geronimo and his handful of Apaches did for years.

The course of the trail, so far as he could see, was favorable, and, without spending time in studying it, he once more climbed into the saddle and started Kitty at a moderate walk.

The path was too narrow for a couple of horsemen to ride abreast, but that was likely to be the case had the footprints been those of men or animals, since both travel in the same manner. It would not have been pleasant to follow the path into a village of red men, though, had the choice been forced upon him, he would have preferred it to turning back.

He noticed that the trend was downward, though not inconveniently so for Kitty, who advanced without hesitation, as if she too understood the streak of good fortune.

Probably an eighth of a mile was passed in this manner, when, without the least warning, a curve in the trail brought him in sight of a single Indian wigwam, standing at the right in a small natural clearing. The mare pricked her ears and slackened her gait, as if not fully satisfied with the appearance of things. Hillson brought her to a halt, and spent several minutes in inspecting the outlook.

The trail was enclosed on its sides by rocks and an unusually dense growth of trees, which shut off the view except immediately in front, so that the meeting, as it may be called, came

without the notice he would have received had the topography been different.

As far as he could see, there was but the single tepee, which was of the usual conical shape, with the tops of several poles projecting through the crest, and a flap in the skins below showing the only door with which the aboriginal residence was furnished.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DESCENDING PATH.

BUT Lieutenant Hillson was less interested in the tepee than in the occupants. He had seen hundreds of similar lodges in the Northwest and knew they contained enemies more frequently than friends.

The singular feature of the scene was that only the single primitive structure was in sight. It is a rare thing for the American Indian to play the hermit. Their numbers may be few, but where one family is, it is safe to count upon several. As the mare slowly walked along the trail and brought her rider in front of the lodge, however, it became manifest that there was but the single dwelling.

That was curious, but the youth would have felt better pleased had the dwellers shown themselves. Not a living person was in sight.

He hoped all were absent, but it was not probable. The existence of an Indian's lodge means that some member of his family is near.

The ignorance of Hillson on these points left the imagination free to conjure up all manner of perils. He fancied the red men had detected him before he saw the lodge, and were only waiting until he reached a certain point in the trail before opening upon him with their rifles. He even fixed the precise spot where the attack would be made.

There was a slight depression in the gravelly ground, a few inches to the left of the path, as if made by the hoof of a horse slipping.

“*There's* where I will catch it!” he thought, giving way to one of those powerful whims which at certain times the strongest minds cannot resist; “the instant Kitty puts her forefoot opposite that spot they will fire at me!”

Such being his conviction, perhaps the reader can form an idea of his feelings as his mare steadily drew near the point. He tried to laugh at himself, but at the decisive moment

his feelings were too strong. He ducked his head and cast a furtive look behind him.

No shot was fired and he saw nothing to cause alarm. The flap of the lodge was pulled aside, and at the upper part of the opening appeared a pair of bright black eyes, a portion of the copper forehead and upper part of the cheeks of someone slyly peeping at him as he rode past.

That countenance did not belong to a warrior nor to a foe. It was that of some child or comely squaw (that is as comely as they are ever known to be), and being satisfied of this, Hillson extended his hand and fluttered it in salutation, nodding his head at the same time and smiling in his very best style.

Possibly the sight of the bareheaded man with a blanket wrapped about his shoulders, riding by on the pony, raised a doubt in the mind of the Indian as to his race, and she was trying to answer the question when the mysterious horseman turned and saluted her.

That removed all doubts. The hand that was withdrawn from under the blanket and gracefully waved, the smiling nod, and, above

all, the full view of the face and features showed the Caucasian too clearly to be mistaken.

The instant the Indian saw the attention of the white youth fixed upon her (or possibly him), she withdrew from sight like a flash.

“But all the same she is watching me,” laughed Hillson, passing from view around a bend in the trail.

He was now able to laugh at his own fears, though he was not altogether rid of them. The dread of a shot in the back led him to force Kitty to a trot, which was the swiftest gait attainable along the narrow path. She held it for several hundred yards when the ground became so rough and descending that she was forced to pick her way with greater care.

The fact that the grade was steadily downward impressed Hillson. He had already settled in his mind that it was not the path made by wild animals in going to and returning from water, but a genuine Indian trail.

“And I have no doubt that the hoof of the Wild Cat’s pony or his own moccason has

pressed the ground here many a time," he muttered, referring to one of the worst vagrant Blackfeet known on the reservation; "I have been half expecting to meet him ever since I struck this path; it would have been singular if that lodge back there proved to be his own."

Hillson was giving his fancy free rein when Kitty pricked her ears and slackened her pace in a way that left no doubt she had discovered something in the path in front. Her rider had hardly time to grasp his revolver, which he had just shoved back into place, when the noise of a pony came round a bend in the trail, quickly followed by his small, shapely head, coal black in color, with an Indian warrior astride of his bare back.

"*That's the Wild Cat!*" was the thought which instantly came to the startled youth, "and a row is bound to come."

The Blackfoot vagrant to whom he referred had an ugly countenance, with irregular features, made tenfold more repulsive by the vario-colored paint daubed and streaked over it. His long, coarse black hair dangled over

his shoulders, and the eyes had the evil gleam of the rattlesnake.

The Wild Cat carried a rifle across the spine of his pony in front, and an ugly knife was thrust into the girdle about his waist.

Whether he was alarmed at sight of the young man approaching cannot be said, but if so he gave no evidence of it. He rode evenly forward, his pony on a walk, with his piercing eyes fixed on the face of the young man. Perhaps he recognized him as one he had seen at the fort, though he must have wondered at sight of the head, without any covering except that which crowned his own, and with the blanket drawn up and gathered about the chin.

The cloth, whose ends fell about Hillson's knees and feet, completely covered his hand and arms, except where the fingers of one hand partly peeped out and held the folds together.

The other clasped the single revolver in his possession, ready to fire at the first hostile move on the part of the notorious vagrant, who preferred murder and thieving to any other forms of amusement.

The Wild Cat saw himself approached in a manner different from ever before. He could not know what was beneath that all-enveloping blanket, nor how ready some deadly weapon was to be discharged. Had the arms been uncovered he could have formed his "combination," and guided his own actions with more intelligence, but the danger most dreaded is that whose nature is unknown or only suspected.

The Wild Cat gave part of the path. Kitty was about to reciprocate when Hillson checked her, holding her to the centre of the trail.

The Indian pony was obliged to step entirely outside and pick his way forward, while the mare strode forward like an empress.

The knees of the lieutenant and the Black-foot grazed as they met, but the look of the youth was as defiant as that of the vagrant, who found the flash of his own treacherous orbs met by the manly glow of the youth who feared him not.

They passed without a word or a hostile movement, though each was prepared to meet it with lightning quickness. Hillson had

bluffed magnificently, but he was vastly relieved when another bend in the descending trail shut them out from each other's sight. He dreaded one of those quick discharges from the rifle of the Blackfoot.

But nothing of the kind took place, and the lieutenant was beginning to congratulate himself that all danger was over, when Kitty unexpectedly showed that she had made another discovery.

This time, instead of simply pricking her ear, she came to a stop, snuffing and looking so sharply to the left that it was easy to locate the point where the danger was located.

Her rider did not urge her, for his confidence in her intelligence was too great. Instead of that he softly slipped from the saddle and began stealing through the wood and among the rocks, with the noiseless tread of an Indian, little dreaming of what was to meet his vision within the following three minutes.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LOWER LEVEL.

LEAVING his mare Kitty standing in the path, Lieutenant Hillson continued treading his way through the bushes, undergrowth, and wood, and around the bowlders and rocks, until he had penetrated to a distance of fifty yards, when he stopped. He had caught the outlines of a figure through the vegetation.

The second look identified it. It was Palmer, with his back toward him, apparently debating with himself the next step to take.

Hillson's heart gave a throb of delight, and he was planning a surprise, when, in his agitation, he stepped upon a twig which snapped under his foot. His friend turned his head with a start.

“Hello, Russ!”

“Hello, Al!”

And the next minute their hands met in a

clasp as warm as that of the night before, when both believed the farewell the final one.

A few words told each the strange experience of the other since their separation. The exchange was hardly finished when Hillson, taking the blanket from his shoulders, flung it about those of Palmer.

“You need it more than I do.”

“A compromise will be better,” replied Palmer, who, although his teeth were chattering, drew his knife, and proceeded deliberately to cut the cloth into halves. This made the portion of each scanty, but the comfort afforded to both was appreciated to its fullest extent.

“Well, old fellow,” said Hillson, as they began picking their way to where Kitty was awaiting them, “I think this little expedition of ours has not been a howling success.”

“In one respect it has not, but in another it has never been surpassed.”

“I have thought the same as you about our escape from the torrent,” replied Hillson, understanding to what he referred; “but again I have asked myself, that since both of us

escaped, whether it was so wonderful, after all."

The elder shook his head.

"Don't make the mistake of minifying our deliverance, which I do not believe could be repeated again in a thousand times. To me it is little short of a miracle."

"I have thanked God many a time, and shall continue to do so as long as I live, for it was the most striking event of its kind that I have ever known."

"We have lost our rifles, and I shall never see my horse again, while we shall have to make a requisition on the commissary department before we are fit to go on parade, but what will not a man give in exchange for his life?"

"Here we are," observed Hillson, halting in the path.

"Ah, Kitty, I am glad to see you," said Palmer, petting the intelligent mare, "and I really suspect you do not feel very bad over my return, do you, my pretty jade?"

The animal's pleasure was shown as clearly as when she greeted Hillson, who, with a

laugh, remarked that if this thing continued, he would begin to grow jealous.

“She will be glad to carry us both,” he added, “though we shan’t be able to make very great speed with her. I wonder whither this path will lead us if we stick to it.”

Palmer studied the position of the sun a few minutes before answering :

“It has almost the right course, but we can hardly hope that it joins the mountain trail we were foolish enough to leave yesterday afternoon.”

However, it was clear that nothing was to be gained by speculating. The only way to settle the questions that came up was by pushing forward and finding out for themselves.

Lieutenant Palmer took the lead, with Hillson walking close behind him, and Kitty following like an affectionate canine. They did not mean to tax her strength until it should become necessary. Palmer had done considerable hard tramping since early morning, but he declined his friend’s invitation to ride. The trail continued to descend, though occasional rises were encountered, and many a

boulder and rock were flanked by tiresome detours.

The hopes of the young officers were that the path they were following would lead them to the mountain trail, though they were not without grave doubts from the first. It has been explained that if they could return to the route they were following on entering the mountain region, they could have ridden straight to Fort Assinaboine without loss of time.

Their doubts were confirmed at the end of half an hour, when they were convinced they were as far from the mountain trail, if not actually farther, than when they first met. This might or might not be favorable. If it wound among the foot-hills to the more open country northward, little would be lost; but they saw that if they wished to reach the fort before night, no time must be thrown away.

“What’s the use of playing the hypocrite?” suddenly asked Palmer, turning his head and looking at his companion with an odd expression on his face.

“What do you mean, old fellow?”

“ You are waiting for me to refer to it, and I have been holding back for you, but you are too pig-headed to come down like a man and own up.”

Hillson's looks showed his continued perplexity.

“ Confound it ! we are both half starved to death, though we haven't said so. Am I right, Lieutenant Russell Hillson ? ”

“ You never hit the head of the nail more squarely in all your life ; although I have had nothing to say I have kept up a lively thinking as to how we can get something to fill the aching void within, that grows steadily more aching each half hour.”

“ Have you found the solution ? ”

“ Not yet, though I don't feel that the time has come to despair ; we have each his revolver with plenty of cartridges that have not been harmed by the water. This is a country abounding with game, but it takes something bigger than pistols to bring it down.”

“ We ought to get nigh enough to something eatable to wing it with a pistol shot,” replied Palmer, resuming his lead of the procession.

It was evident by this time that they had left most of the mountains behind them, and, though they saw nothing of the other trail to which they had pinned their hopes, they were as far from the wild precipitous section as though they had followed it down the side of the towering inaccessible walls, which they were able to pierce only at the one point where the fissure appeared on their left.

In other words, the mountain trail would have improved their present situation only slightly beyond giving them the power to locate themselves more definitely.

Having exchanged their views on the food question, they pushed on once more, neither speaking, for almost half an hour. By that time the face of the country underwent a marked change.

The brush, rocks, boulders, and roughness remained, but they had reached a much lower level than at any time since morning. The trail not only ceased its downward trend, but was broader and so much fainter that it was evident it served as an outlet from the mountainous regions, and that the Indians who

were accustomed to use it for that purpose diverged to the right and left after reaching the section where our friends now found themselves.

They came to a stop, as if they felt a crisis had been reached.

“My proposition,” said the elder, “is that we go into camp here and renew, in a humble way, the hunt on which we started yesterday.”

“I am afraid Indians are not far off,” replied his companion.

“I have seen no signs of them.”

“But that signifies nothing; we are following one of their trails, and I have had a suspicion all along that we shall hear from the Wild Cat before we reach the fort.”

“He has had plenty of time to overtake you if he wished to do so; besides, he won't dare to molest us while he is alone.”

“That's the point; he is likely to get some of his warriors together and follow us so rapidly that we cannot keep out of his way.”

“I respectfully renew my proposition that we go upon a foraging expedition,” said

Palmer, who felt that his hunger could bear inattention no longer.

“Very well ; I am as anxious for food as you, though it is mighty little chance I see of getting it.”

CHAPTER XV.

AN ANTELOPE.

THE officers had campaigned long enough in the Northwest to neglect no precaution at such a time. Kitty was carefully led from the trail to a point so far off that she could not be seen by anyone passing along the path. Fortunately, her friends found a spot where considerable grass was growing. It was welcome, as she proved by beginning to crop it without delay.

Reaching the main path once more, Palmer and Hillson devoted several minutes to blotting out the prints of her hoofs. This could not be fully done, but they were convinced that even a Blackfoot Indian would have to scan the ground closely to detect the impressions of their single animal.

In obedience to a whim rather than as the result of reasoning, Hillson knelt down and pressed his ear to the ground.

“By gracious!” he exclaimed, instantly rising; “someone is coming, sure enough!”

As he spoke he made a leap from the trail and hastily scrambled to the dense undergrowth near at hand. Behind these he lay flat, Palmer placing himself by his side.

“Are you sure you were not mistaken?” asked the elder, after waiting a minute.

“The sounds were too distinct—— Sh! does *that* look as if I was in error?”

It was the Wild Cat himself who rode into sight. Behind him came two other ponies, each bearing a warrior with knife and rifle. They were as grim and silent as spectres, apparently gazing straight ahead and seeing nothing not in front of their horse’s noses.

But the youths needed no one to tell them that the keen black eyes of each took in the ground on either hand and were sure to see objects that would escape the ordinary vision.

The question which each officer asked himself was whether any or all were likely to detect Kitty’s footprints. If so, what would follow?

If they were in pursuit of Hillson (for they had no reason to know he had a companion), they were not likely to suspect he had turned aside from the main trail, and, sharp as was their eyesight, they were not scrutinizing the ground for evidence of such diversion.

The coming of the Blackfeet was so sudden that Hillson and Palmer were given no time to agree upon their course of action, but each held his only weapon grasped in his right hand and ready for instant use. Neither was willing to run from these vagrants, even though they were veteran warriors each armed with a deadly rifle. The moment the miscreants wheeled from the path they would rise to confront them and await their business.

But the threatened collision did not occur, for the reason that the Wild Cat and his companions rode straight on, their ponies on a walk, until they passed from sight a short way beyond. Then Hillson and Palmer looked at each other before rising from the ground.

“I would give considerable,” said the latter, “to know the real meaning of that; we are

acting as though they are enemies seeking our lives, when, after all, we may be mistaken.”

“We know the Wild Cat is bad enough to shoot his own brother, but it is not impossible that he is afraid of the consequences of putting an extinguisher on us.”

Should it turn out that the Blackfeet were hunting for the officers, the latter saw the risk of hunting game in the neighborhood; and yet, great as was the danger, they undertook to do so within the next five minutes. Not only that, but they parted company the better to ensure success.

Palmer in one respect was not disappointed. He had picked his way only a short distance, after parting from his friend, when a soft rustling in the vegetation directly in front warned him he was approaching some man or animal. Hoping it was the latter, he sank on his hands and knees and began feeling every inch that he passed. Fortunately there was no wind blowing, so his scent could not be carried to the game, if such it proved to be.

The anxious hunter's heart fluttered a minute later, when he caught the indistinct

outlines of some creature still in a direct line with his approach. So great was his agitation that for a minute or two he believed he must give way to an attack of "buck fever." But by a resolute exercise of the will he overcame that strange, nervous weakness, and, with the steadiness of a veteran, resumed his painfully slow advance.

The fever threatened him again when he identified the game as a solitary antelope cropping the tender shoots and leaves from some bushes by which it was surrounded.

Ah, if he could but bring it down, what a royal feast he and Hillson would make! His hunger was now so keen that he cared nothing for the Wild Cat and his warriors. There might have been a hundred of the most venomous dusky vagrants camped within a stone's throw, but he would not abandon the chance of securing the banquet for which he longed with a yearning that was felt through every fibre of his being.

The delicacy of the lieutenant's situation will be appreciated. Had he possessed his Winchester at the moment of detecting the

antelope, he could have brought it down with ease, but he must get still closer before he could use his pistol effectively.

Could he do it?

Since an absolute calm prevailed, it would seem that he had only to make his advance noiseless. The antelope kind are not only gifted with wonderfully fine eyesight and scent, but their hearing is so fine that one finds it hard to understand how a hunter is ever able to bring them down.

Palmer glanced at the ground immediately in front, and so far as he could judge it was favorable. With hardly a pause, therefore, he resumed creeping forward, his weapon in hand, for he was now so close that he had decided to fire should the creature start, even though he was not as near as he wished.

It was a rare piece of good fortune that he had been able to catch sight of the antelope, and if it were once scared away, there was no possible chance of gaining another shot at it.

The timid creature continued browsing for a minute or two longer, as if in perfect security. Then, all at once, it stopped and raised its

head, as if listening. Many species of game make a practice of this, which is not a sign that they have heard anything, but rather an ordinary precaution against the approach of enemies.

Palmer's heart was in his mouth, and he brought his pistol to the front.

"Whatever happens," he thought, "I shall give you a shot, but I prefer not to do so just yet."

The creature resumed its browsing, as if satisfied, and understanding its meaning, he began moving forward once more with a slowness which made his progress like that of the hour hand around the face of a clock.

But almost at the same moment, the antelope ceased browsing again, and threw up its head, its jaws half filled with autumn leaves and shoots. It held those jaws motionless, that nothing should interfere with its delicacy of hearing.

"*That* means something," was the truthful conclusion of the alarmed Palmer; "it is suspicious."

He had not detected the slightest rustling

made by himself, and yet that might have been the case, while the extraordinary hearing of the antelope gave it warning.

The hunter would have asked for only ten feet more before using his pistol. That attained, he was confident he could bring down the game. As the matter stood, he considered the chances of a miss or hit as about even.

The pretty creature held its attitude of intense attention only a minute or two, when it whirled like a flash of sunlight and was gone.

Its flight was amazingly quick, but Palmer had been expecting it and was prepared. The instant it turned he let fly with three chambers of his Colt. He discharged them with the utmost celerity, but the animal was out of sight when the last bullet sped after it, simply following after the others with which he had managed to secure something resembling an aim.

The disappointment was so bitter that Palmer could not submit without a desperate effort to retrieve it. At another time he would have laughed at the hunter, placed as he was,

who tried to gain a second chance to bag an antelope with a Colt revolver as his only weapon. Leaping to his feet he dashed after the fleeing game as though he expected to run it down by his own superior fleetness. It was not until he had stumbled and fallen several times, and was panting from his severe exhaustion, that he paused with a full understanding of the folly of the task.

“What a fool!” he muttered; “that antelope is a mile away by this time and still going. I may hunt for a week without getting such a chance again. If I did hit it with one of my charges, the hurt was only enough to lend wings to its flight. I hope,” he added with a sigh, “that Hillson has done better, but I haven’t heard anything from his pistol.”

He recalled that he had travelled a goodly distance from the spot where he separated from his friend, and that unless he used great care they would become lost to each other. While that might mean nothing serious, it ensured a long and laborious tramp to the fort, during which he must suffer a great deal.

He recalled, too, another alarming probability.

“What will the Wild Cat and his warriors think of the report of my pistol, for they must have heard it? If they mean any crooked business, I have given them valuable help.

“Come to think, though,” he added grimly, “it is likely to prove of no assistance at all. Suppose they hastened to the spot where they heard the firing, they would have no more chance of overtaking *me* than I had of running down the antelope.”

CHAPTER XVI.

AN EXCHANGE.

LIEUTENANT PALMER sat down on a huge stone until he could recover his breath. He did not need the half blanket he had managed to retain during his hurried movements, for he was in a warmer glow than he had experienced for a long time.

He was about to rise for the purpose of seeking his companion, with the advice that they were only throwing away time in their efforts to secure game, and urging him to hasten to the fort, when he heard a low, bird-like whistle, apparently from a point behind him.

His first thought was that it was made by some bird, but something peculiar in the tone and its manner of repetition reminded him of the signal which he and Hillson sometimes used when on their hunting excursions.

“It must be he,” he said, after the call had

been repeated several times ; “ anyway I shall soon know.”

He replied, and the next moment his face lit up.

“ I might have known it was Hillson ; but I don’t understand the need of his working business in *that* style.”

By occasional signalling to each other, the young officers kept track of their mutual positions and were able to meet without a prolonged search.

“ I heard your pistol,” said Hillson, “ but I don’t see any game.”

“ Nor I either ; it was another failure, my boy ; I hoped that you had met with more success.”

“ I haven’t had the first glimpse of anything of the kind, though I neglected nothing I could think of ; there isn’t much fun in this kind of sport, Palmer.”

“ Why were you so guarded in signalling to me ? ”

“ So the Blackfeet wouldn’t notice it.”

“ Were they anywhere near ? ”

“ There are five of them encamped within a

hundred yards of where we saw the Wild Cat and that couple ride past.”

Palmer was astonished, as he might well be, and his friend explained :

“ You had been gone only a little while, and I was groping around for game, when I came within a hair of stumbling right into the encampment of redskins. I was just in time to save myself, when I took some careful observations. The first thing I noticed was that the Wild Cat and those whom we saw were there. They had dismounted and their ponies were cropping the grass near by. All five of the warriors seemed to be holding an earnest talk about something, which of course was beyond my finding out.”

“ You had no means of judging whether they were friends or enemies ? ”

“ None, but one fact interested me ; the two Indians that were first there had been cooking some kind of game. I saw fragments of the feast lying about, and the faint odor I caught drove me almost frantic. I did not dare go forward and beg for a share, and, while trying to decide on what was best to do, it occurred

to me that you might spoil everything by firing your revolver. They would hear the report, and, if they wanted to find you, the means was thus furnished.

“I was so nervous over the fear of such a mistake on your part, that I stole away from the camp and set out to find you. Before I could do so, I was startled by hearing the three shots from your pistol. I started on a run to overtake you, but you travelled too fast for me ; so I saved my strength and fell back on the signal which I was sure you would recognize.”

“We have been acting on the theory all along,” said Palmer, “that every Indian whom we meet or see in this part of the world is a foe. I believe we are mistaken, though it is erring on the safe side. Inasmuch as there is no chance of our getting any game without rifles, I propose that we take Kitty and strike a bee line for the fort. We have not been deprived so very long of food, though I am sure neither of us could be any hungrier if we hadn't tasted a morsel for a week.”

“If we find our appetites too much for us we can fall back on our shoes.”

“Or Kitty,” suggested Palmer significantly.

But her owner shook his head :

“We must approach much nearer famishing before a hair of her body shall be harmed.”

The couple found themselves close to the trail over which they had passed some time before. They walked briskly in the direction taken by the Wild Cat and his companions, of whom nothing was seen. Reaching the point where the mare had been turned aside, Hillson said :

“Before making our start for home, let’s have another try for food ; come with me.”

Without asking for any explanation, Palmer kept company with his friend, who speedily left the trail and made a wide detour to the left. By and by he paused long enough to whisper :

“We are approaching the camp I told you about.”

“Do you understand the danger ?” asked Palmer.

“I am quite sure I do,” was the surprised answer.

“I mean the danger *to the Indians* ?”

“How ?”

“If I get a sniff of that game you told me about, I won’t be satisfied with anything less than it *all*; they will probably refuse; then I will become irrestrainable and woe to the red men!”

Hillson smiled, but uttered no comment. He had pushed only a short way further, when he said:

“That’s good; it’s just what I hoped, but hardly expected.”

If Lieutenant Palmer, after firing his three ineffective shots at the frightened antelope, were told he had hit the “bull’s eye,” he could not have appreciated the jest; but he now saw he had builded better than he knew: the miss was the very best thing that could have happened.

It drew the attention of the Blackfeet to the fact that white men were near at hand; for the short, sharp crack of their revolvers was familiar to them. Instead of setting off in haste after the one that had discharged the weapon, however, they made toward another point of the compass. It was not their intention to run into any ambush set for them by

the cunning palefaces. They were not the ones to break the laws until an opportunity was given to gauge the probable consequences.

They were gone, and, although the proceeding of the young officers savored of rashness, they hastened to the deserted camp, and proceeded to help themselves to the fragments of the feast which were plentifully scattered around.

It cannot be said that the meal was the choicest of which they had lately partaken, but their intense hunger gave it a relish which no condiment ever invented could equal. They ate rapidly, with furtive glances around lest the red men should pounce upon them before they were aware.

Nothing occurred to alarm them, for, with all their cunning, the Wild Cat and his warriors were not likely to suspect any such flank movement as that named. The meal was speedily completed and Hillson and Palmer were ready to push their return to Fort Assinaboine to the utmost.

And just then, when it would seem that all real danger was over, the young officers came

near committing a blunder which threatened their overthrow. Palmer halted at the edge of the trail to watch against the Blackfeet, while Hillson hurried after his mare, which had been left only a short distance off.

The first surprise came when he reached the place, and, after thoroughly examining it, saw nothing of the animal. He walked back and forth, pronouncing her name in a guarded voice, but there was no answering neigh.

Finally he stooped down and studied a faint impression beside the one made by the hoof of his matchless steed, where the ground was still moist and soft.

“Just what I feared!” he muttered, straightening up; “that’s the mark of a moccason. While Palmer and I were helping ourselves to dinner the Blackfeet were helping themselves to my property; but they haven’t got away with it yet,” he added, with a flash of his handsome eyes; “and if the court knows herself, and she thinks she do, there there will be a first class row before that little thing is accomplished.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE TOSS OF A NICKEL.

WHILE Lieutenant Hillson was searching for his pet mare, Kitty, Lieutenant Palmer was holding his place as sentinel along the trail only a short way off.

He was wondering at the delay of his friend, when, to his amazement, a Blackfoot warrior came riding along the path from the north. He appeared so suddenly that the young officer had no time to get out of his sight. He therefore made the best of it, and assumed a boldness which would have become him had he been at the head of a squad of well-armed troopers.

Palmer's supposition was that the Indian was the first of the party about which Hillson had told him only a few minutes before, but when the scamp had advanced to a point nearly opposite, he perceived he was alone.

He perceived also that the pony which he was riding was Kitty, and Palmer rose to the situation at once.

There are no more inveterate horse thieves in the world than the vagrant Indians of the West and Northwest. It was evident that this particular one had stumbled upon the valuable mare, and was making off with her.

Lieutenant Palmer stepped into the path in front of Kitty, who gave a faint whinny of recognition, and, levelling his revolver at the amazed redskin, said :

“Come down out of that or I will let daylight through you !”

The Blackfoot may have been ignorant of the niceties of the English language, but no words were required to make clear the meaning of the young officer. He slid from the saddle as though jerked therefrom, and hastened to say :

“Gib horse—good friend—tanks !”

“That’s all right ; off with you, or this gun of mine may accidentally discharge itself and you’ll get hurt.”

The warrior, completely flanked by the bluffing of the bareheaded young man in his half blanket, was glad enough to escape with a whole body, and he skurried along the trail with a speed which quickly took him out of sight.

Meanwhile Hillson had caught the sound of voices, and lost no time in hurrying to the spot to learn what it meant. His surprise and delight was great.

“I couldn’t have done better myself,” he said; “but I am afraid we are not through with the Wild Cat and the rest.”

“It wasn’t he that I compelled to slip out of that saddle a good deal quicker than he got in.”

“But he belongs to his gang; he is another of those vagrant Indians that are the curse of the reservations.”

“Which being the case, it strikes me this is a good time for Kitty to carry double.”

Hillson compelled his friend to take his place in the saddle, and was on the point of taking his seat behind him when he changed his mind.

“What’s that for?” asked Palmer.

“We can’t travel very fast just here, so I will walk ahead. As soon as we reach better ground I’ll join you.”

The plan seemed a good one, and Palmer consented. He really needed the rest more than his companion, while it struck the latter that, in the event of a meeting with the Wild Cat or any of the “Dog Indians,” he could act more effectively on his feet. Two officers on the same steed cannot look very formidable, no matter how hard they may try to do so.

The situation of the young men was unique. Like other white men, they were accustomed to travel back and forth over the reservation, with no more thought of molestation from the Indians than if journeying in a railway train. While hundreds of the aboriginal Americans are engaged in farming, and are peaceful and law abiding, the “Dog Indians” prefer horse thieving and all manner of outlawry. It is the fear of the white men that keeps most of the savages on the reservations docile. Those who will not be restrained wait till they are far

enough from the forts to feel beyond the reach of the military.

While, therefore, Hillson and Palmer considered themselves in peril so long as they were in the mountains, where their dead bodies might lie weeks undiscovered, they knew that the nearer they placed themselves to Fort Assinaboine the less likely were they to be injured.

It followed that the true course was to decrease that distance as fast as it could be done. Indeed, they believed that only a few miles were needed to ensure their safety.

Hillson walked briskly along the path which for the time led directly toward the fort, Palmer following with Kitty. The Blackfeet were quite near, and it might be there were others besides those whom they had seen, who would be glad to fire a stealthy shot at the young men, provided they were safe against punishment.

Palmer's place in the saddle was a vast improvement, so far as comfort went, over that of walking, and he appreciated the kindness of his friend, who insisted that he should

ride ; but, all the same, he felt that his situation was the more dangerous because of its prominence, and the fact that the Blackfeet, as he believed, were likely to make their attack or demonstration from the rear.

But fully a half mile was passed without the first evidence of the proximity of their enemies. Palmer continually looked behind him, while his friend, playing the part of guide, pushed on at a brisk gait, his hopes rising the further he went.

A singular feature was noticed by both. The trail had grown fainter, until at one time it promised to disappear altogether ; but it now became more distinct, suggesting that the Indians, who had gradually separated after coming down from the mountains, had resumed the process of coming together again.

“Ah !” said Hillson, abruptly halting and looking around with a smile, “you know the old truth, that there are always two paths or roads in our front, and it is for us to choose the right or wrong one.”

“I think I have heard something of the

kind during my early childhood," replied Palmer from the saddle.

"We have now an illustration," added the younger, repeating the dramatic gestures and manner of which he was an exponent when a country school-boy.

"I observe."

Palmer saw his reference. The clearly marked trail bifurcated directly in front of them. The angle was so gradual that the branches diverged like the sides of the letter V. Since one was probably the more direct course to the fort, they saw the need of making a right selection, though in that respect the question was not one of life and death.

But when they had consulted a minute or two, each confessed to a strange belief that, after all, it had become a question of life and death.

They had accepted the absence of all signs of the Blackfeet as proof that the vagrants dared follow them no farther because of the approach to Fort Assinaboine; but now, when they came to consult over the matter, they feared it was another of the treacherous

schemes of the Wild Cat, whose resentment over the bluffing received by him and his warriors would rankle in his breast until he found the means of resenting the insult.

“Somewhere along one of these trails,” said Hillson, “that miscreant has laid an ambush, and he and his brother dogs are waiting for us to walk into it.”

“But along *which* trail?” asked Palmer.

“Aye, *that’s* the question to be decided; you see that the chances for and against us are even. Now, if the Wild Cat fixes upon one he has some reason for it; what is that reason?”

“He has concluded that we will naturally take the most direct road to Assinaboine; but, so far as I can judge, there is no choice in that respect.”

“Perhaps he will decide that we will follow the one most travelled.”

“And there is little choice in *that* respect.”

“Then,” continued Palmer, “it is more than likely that he has laid his ambush along *both* paths, and the danger from one is as great as from the other.”

“It may be ; but I am inclined to think he has not enough warriors to divide in that fashion, but has concentrated them at one spot.”

“If they were white men they would not go through all this *fol de rol*, when there are a hundred places already passed by us that would give them secure shelter ; but *that's* the Indian of it, and there's but the one way to solve the puzzle.”

Hunting through his pockets, which were beginning to dry after their saturation in the torrent, Palmer brought forth a nickel half dime, which he had carried for months as a pocket piece.

“If head turns up,” said he, balancing it on his thumb and forefinger and looking down at his companion, “we wheel to the right ; if tail, we take the left.”

“I'm agreed,” replied Hillson, putting up a silent prayer, as did the other, that Providence would decide it aright.

The coin went fluttering aloft, and Hillson bent over as it dropped on the ground by Kitty's left forefoot.

“Head it is,” he said, picking it up and returning it to the owner; “follow your leader.”

Hillson walked briskly along the right trail, hopeful that the choice had been the right one, but altogether too sensible to believe there was no liability of mistake. It was at his suggestion that Palmer descended from the saddle and took his place behind him on foot, where the prominence of the two was the same.

Kitty, who seemed to know what all this meant, walked demurely behind her friends, who arranged to keep her quite near. She had proven her intelligent vigilance so frequently that great reliance was placed upon her.

It is hardly in the power of the brainiest horse to detect the presence of a party of Indians in hiding some distance off, and whose training enables them to lie as motionless as if they were not breathing the breath of life, but the dumb brutes, as they are called, have performed more than one wonderful exploit in that line, and Kitty herself had a record of which any of her species might feel proud.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT FORT ASSINABOINE.

FOR three hundred yards the journey along the dimly marked trail was pushed in silence, the senses of the lieutenants seemingly concentrated into those of sight and hearing. There was not a spot on either hand where an Indian could not have remained in absolute hiding, while the officers walked in review before his levelled rifle without seeing their peril. Why, therefore, the Blackfeet should have gone through all this "red tape" had no other explanation than that hinted by Lieutenant Palmer.

Kitty was fully as alert, but the time soon came when their friends were satisfied that either there had been no danger at all, or they had successfully flanked it.

"More than likely we were mistaken," said Hillson, suggesting that his friend should remount.

“We can believe so now, but could not a while ago; I will walk a little farther; I have rested enough, and we may as well save the strength of the mare——”

At that very moment, when they felt more assured than at any time since setting out on their return, the crack of a rifle broke the stillness on their left, and they heard the whistle of the bullet which passed between their faces.

“Let’s run!” whispered Hillson, ducking and moving swiftly along the trail in momentary expectation of other shots.

Looking around after running a brief way, he saw Kitty near him, as his ears had already told him she was, but Palmer was missing.

“Can it be?” he asked himself, straightening up with a suspicion of the cause, and discovering the next moment that his suspicion was right.

Palmer was so enraged by the unexpected shot that for the moment he forgot himself, and throwing his prudence to the winds, dashed through the undergrowth and around the rocks, revolver in hand.

“Confound you!” he exclaimed, “I’ll teach you that assassination don’t pay.”

But the dusky miscreant had been quick to detect his peril, and while the smoke was curling upward from the muzzle of his rifle, he made off. His pursuer caught only a glimpse of the figure as it vanished, but he let fly with every chamber of his weapon, his success being about the same as that which attended his effort to bring down the antelope.

“It wasn’t a prudent thing to do,” he remarked, as he rejoined Hillson, “but such treachery is unbearable.”

“The Wild Cat did what we might have feared ; while he and most of his warriors lay in ambush along the other trail, he did not leave this entirely unguarded ; but I am sure we have seen the last of him.”

“For the present ; but if we continue our hunting excursions among the Bear Paw Mountains, we are sure to meet him again.”

“Do you propose to give up our sport on account of *him* ?” asked Hillson reproachfully, after they had gone some distance farther in the direction of the fort.

“Hardly; just as soon as we can get permission for another trip I am ready to try it again.”

“And I am with you; we shall have to lie by several days for repairs; I have a horse and gun to pay for, but there are others to be had, as well as Winchester rifles, and Kitty is always at your service.”

The officers were in the situation of those who have received a challenge from a foe whom they despised. The Wild Cat had given them to understand that when they ventured upon a hunt in that wild region they did so at their peril. They were eager to take up the gage of battle, and were certain to do so on the first opportunity.

But at present their task was to reach Fort Assinaboine with the least possible delay. A good many miles lay before them, and the way was rough and hard to travel, but they now knew where they were, and were not only in no danger of going astray, but were without fear of the Indians, with whom they had had more than one lively scrimmage, though fortunately without harm to either.

The weather, which had been only moderately cold, became more severe. By the middle of the afternoon the temperature had fallen fully ten degrees. Many were the congratulations they uttered because of the single blanket between them. Even with that, however, they suffered not a little, and no returning wanderers were ever more pleased to reach a safe haven than they were that evening, when, at last, they found themselves within their comfortable quarters at Fort Assinaboine, where they received all necessary attention.

Hillson and Palmer expected unpleasant consequences from their violent experience, and they were not fully themselves until a couple of days had passed. Nothing serious, however, resulted. They were young, strong, rugged, and with good habits, while they had already served an apprenticeship in campaigning in the Northwest, and were, therefore, capable of withstanding privations and sufferings before which many others would have succumbed.

The lieutenants did not forget the resolution formed on their way home, after the meeting

with the Wild Cat and his gang. These people were defying the military authorities by their acts, and were liable to arrest for leaving the reservation. The only obstacle to bringing them to book was the difficulty of laying hands upon them. It was known that the Wild Cat often appeared among the farming Indians, and once or twice had the impudence to present himself at the fort with his claim for an annuity.

Colonel Draper could have placed him under arrest at that time, but he desired irrefragable proofs of the serious crimes of which he stood accused. Though most of the other Blackfeet were obedient to the laws and showed commendable interest in their grazing and farming interests, they could not rid themselves of their kinship toward those of their race who chose to feel otherwise. The best of these men would screen a dusky horse thief or murderer who applied to them when hard pressed by the Indian police or the mounted white guards.

While this was due, in many instances, to fear of the dusky desperadoes, it was more frequently inspired by sympathy for the red

men, whose tastes were those that had been born in them, and from which these Indians themselves were not entirely free.

Colonel Draper, therefore, awaited the time when something could be fixed so clearly upon the Wild Cat that, when arrested and brought to trial, his conviction must follow. In the meantime he advised his friends to keep clear of that portion of the Bear Paw Mountains which he claimed as his stamping ground; but, all the same, when Lieutenants Hillson and Palmer respectfully asked permission to make another venture up the mountain trail, he cheerfully granted their request, and wished them God-speed and a safe return.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MOUNTAIN TRAIL AGAIN.

AND so it came about that precisely one week after the incidents we have described, Lieutenants Russell Hillson and Albert Palmer were riding up the mountain trail from which they had diverged before reaching the highest point, and suffered the misfortunes described because of that departure from the straight path.

The day was clear, crisp, cool, and sunshiny. They had spent so much time on the way that the sun was well down in the sky when they reached the spot where the narrow fissure opened on their left, apparently into and through the solid wall of the mountain.

Hillson, it need not be said, was mounted on his favorite mare, Kitty, while Palmer had secured a horse fully the equal of that which was drowned by the flood. Each carried an

excellent magazine rifle, and they were, therefore, as fully equipped as they could be for whatever adventures were in store for them.

The former trip had proven rather expensive, especially to Palmer, who was obliged to pay for the horse as well as his lost gun; but that was one of the "casualties of war," as he expressed it, and it did not lessen his anticipations of the glorious enjoyment before him.

Upon reaching the fissure they halted a minute or two to view it.

"Some of that tremendous mass of water must have found its way through there," remarked Palmer, who was riding in advance; "though there are few signs of its having done so."

"You mustn't forget that a week has passed since then, and little evidence would be left; but you will recall that, for a considerable distance after entering the opening, our course was descending. It may be, therefore, that we are considerably higher than the top of the torrent which gave us such a hustling."

The matter, however, was of no moment, and they pushed on, the elder still at the head,

and on the watch for the unsafe places in the mountain trail which were liable to let them down into the vast ravine on their right, whose slope was like the roof of a house.

“Look!”

It was Palmer who uttered the exclamation, as he reined up, without turning his head.

The sight was a striking one. Two hundred yards away the jutting path wound around a mass of solid rock, disappearing from view immediately beyond. Thus the ledge was the most prominent part of the vast, sloping mountain wall, and must have been visible from a great distance.

Standing at the uppermost portion of the trail was a noble buck with huge spreading antlers. He had approached from the other direction at a leisurely gait, and was turning the bend when he observed the horsemen ascending the path toward him.

The animal stopped short, threw up his head, with its magnificent spread of horns, so as to bring his fine figure in relief against the brilliant sky behind him. The situation of himself and hunters brought him almost in

direct line with the orb of day, which, it may be said, was partly eclipsed by the gigantic form of the animal as it was interposed before its face. Indeed, it dazzled Palmer and Hillson when they looked at him because of the overpowering glare.

It took the buck but a few seconds to scent danger. . Whether he had ever heard the crack of a hostile rifle or not, he knew those two horsemen could not be friends. Rearing on his hind feet, he whirled with astonishing grace and ease, his head, neck, and forefeet seemingly suspended over the abyss below as he turned to face the other way.

It was a splendid chance for a shot, and Palmer's Winchester was brought instantly to his shoulder, but the light partly blinded him and he knew his aim was poor; nevertheless, seeing the game about to vanish, he let fly.

To the surprise of both of the youths the buck made a wild leap fully ten feet to the right of the ledge, over which he went with a crash among the trees, undergrowth, and boulders, disappearing from sight as if he were

a rock cast into the sea, above which the rushing waters instantly closed.

“ Well, if there ever was a chance shot *that* was one ! ” exclaimed Palmer. “ I believe my eyes were shut when I fired, and I had no expectation of hitting him.”

“ And you didn't hit him.”

Palmer turned his head, as though uncertain of the meaning of the remark.

“ Do *you* intend to claim him ? ”

“ No, though I have as much right as you ; but at the moment you pulled trigger, or the fraction of a second before, I caught the report of another gun, and it was the bullet of that which slew the buck, sending him over to the ravine, where none besides the beasts of prey will ever find his body.”

“ I did not notice the report, but you may be right ; for, as I just said, if I slew him it was by accident. It follows that other hunters are ahead of us.”

“ Doubtless there are plenty of them in the mountains, as we learned last week, and it may be we are in for another scrimmage with the Wild Cat and his gang.”

“And we are fortunate enough to have other weapons *this* time than Colt’s revolvers.”

“But the fellow fights like a wild animal, from cover, instead of standing up to his work like a man.”

“We learned that long ago,” said Palmer, shrugging his shoulders as he resumed his ascent of the mountain path, Hillson following, with only a few paces between them. There was enough change in their course to enable them to look at the ledge without encountering the blinding glare of the sun. They kept glancing thither, on the watch for the hunter that had so cleverly taken the game from their grasp. This portion of the path appeared to be firm, but they did not permit their interest in this stranger to lessen their caution.

The shot from the other side of the projecting ledge could not fail to cause the youths considerable uneasiness. As has been remarked, the Indians ought to be peaceable wherever encountered on the reservation. In fact, as we have shown, many of the Crows and Blackfeet helped in the arrest of the

horse thieves of their own race, who now and then stole across the border line from the British possessions and raided upon the farmer Indians that are making such creditable advances in civilization ; but there are always a number of red men who are untrustworthy and vicious, as is the case with their paleface brethren. Some of these are dissatisfied with their treaty stipulations and become "Dog Indians," or vagrants, whose hands are against everyone, whenever there is any temptation presented to do evil.

"Lieutenant," called Hillson, just before reaching the turn in the mountain trail, "don't hurry ; there's no saying who may be lurking beyond waiting for the very chance you will give them if you ride straight forward."

Palmer checked his steed, and partly turning in his saddle, looked in the face of his friend, while they held a brief conversation.

"I have been thinking about that, but you will recall that the best plan, as both of us proved last week, is to bluff the Wild Cat, and not let him think that we hold him in any fear. When you met him alone you refused

to give him half the path. Had you turned aside and allowed him to have it all, he would have shot you from your mare."

"Possibly, though we cannot be certain of that."

"I believe it was he who fired from the brush and then ran like a coward when I made for him with only my revolver, while he had a rifle."

"Even if you are right about that," said the younger officer significantly, "the fact remains that he fired the shot before he ran, and he may do so at this time."

"The fact also remains," added Palmer, "that he didn't hurt anybody by his marksmanship."

"Which is no proof that he may not do so next time."

It was apparent that the elder was eager to meet the vagrant with whom he had had such stirring dealings the week before. Hillson was hardly less desirous of a brush with him, but he appreciated the need of caution in every movement.

"I will be careful," finally remarked

Palmer, who straightway proceeded to violate the pledge by riding toward the turn of the mountain trail, as though not the shadow of danger impended.

Hillson urged him to dismount and take a cautious peep before trusting himself in full sight, but he thought that was showing a timidity which would react upon them. He kept his horse, however, at the slowest possible walk, and leaned forward over his neck that he might be as quick as he in detecting whatever lay beyond.

“I suspect our friend has concluded——”

Lieutenant Palmer had uttered these words when Hillson saw him fling himself over the side of his horse, as if making a plunge after the stricken buck. The crack of a rifle ringing among the gorges at the same moment left no doubt of the cause of the desperate attempt of the young officer to save himself.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PRISONER.

FOR an instant Lieutenant Hillson believed his companion had been struck by the unexpected shot from beyond. His chivalrous nature led him to bound forward with the alarmed question:

“Are you hurt, Al?”

“No; I’m all right, but don’t let him get away; it was one of those Blackfeet that fired at me.”

Hillson turned like a flash and glanced along the trail, which descended as rapidly beyond the curve as it did in the opposite direction. That which he saw angered him beyond expression, for nothing could have been more treacherous than the attempt against the life of his friend.

Two Blackfoot warriors were skurrying down the path as fast as their sinewy legs

could carry them. Their long coarse hair streamed over their backs, and each was partly enveloped in an untidy blanket wrapped about his shoulders, and from beneath which his moccasins twinkled as he made all haste to get out of danger.

The faces which they often turned to glance affrightedly behind them showed they were painted after the fashion so popular with the American race, and the young lieutenant was certain he recognized one of them.

“Now, gentlemen,” he muttered, bringing his rifle to his shoulder, “it is *my* turn.”

The distance was considerable and increasing every moment, but Hillson was an excellent marksman, and was confident of bringing down his man. There was no means of knowing who fired the cowardly shot, but both were equally guilty, and he selected the one in front on the theory that, after discharging his piece, he would naturally be the first to run. The distance between the fugitives was sufficient to permit him to fire over the head of the rear one.

“It was the Wild Cat,” said Palmer, hast-

ily righting himself in the saddle ; “he is the one leading, and I hope you will make a better shot than he did.”

It was the intention of Palmer to take a hand himself, but at the moment Hillson’s eye was ranging along his Winchester, and he was sure the bead was true, behold ! both Indians vanished as though they had never been.

“Well, if that doesn’t beat the beaters !” exclaimed Hillson, lowering his weapon and staring with open mouth at the point where the warriors were visible but a moment before ; “what’s become of them ? Are we in a land of enchantment ?”

“Not a bit of it,” replied Palmer ; “they are hiding behind the trail ; give me room.”

And what did the audacious young officer do but, like another “Old Put,” spur his horse down the trail on a dead run, straight at the point on which he kept his eyes fixed, with the determination of punishing the miscreant that had attempted his life, and whom he knew to be one of the worst Indians in the Northwest !

Hillson was but a second or two behind him.

He was not the one to hesitate when a comrade was in peril, and, swinging himself into the saddle, he spurred his mare to her best. Both animals had been in battle before, and they scented it from afar.

No heed was now paid to the trail that had not been pressed by a hoof for a long time. Bits of rock and stone, displaced by the flying hoofs, rattled down the ravine at their side, and more than once the sure-footed animals seemed to be going over, but the reins lay loose on their necks, and, left to themselves, they did better than if their riders had tried to guide them.

Palmer believed that the Indians, seeing the levelled rifles, had dropped on their faces and rolled among the dense undergrowth, where they could not be seen a dozen yards away. It was frightfully perilous thus to charge upon them, since they had only to lie still and pick off the youths as they came within range.

But it is not impossible that the very impetuosity of the rush averted this danger, for no shot was fired during the few seconds thus occupied, although the officers expected it.

The speed of their horses was so great that they went several paces beyond the spot before they could be checked.

The youths were on the ground in a twinkling, and leaving the steeds to themselves, they leaped into the undergrowth.

“Hallo!” called Palmer; “here is another trail; we are close upon them!”

The pursuer forgot that he was no match for an American Indian on foot, especially among the vines, trees, and rocks, where he is as much at home as is the chamois among the Alpine heights.

Hillson was as eager as his companion, for one of the miscreants had fired at his friend, and the two Indians were among the very worst of their race. Palmer, with his Winchester firmly grasped in his right hand, sped down the path, which, like the main trail, rapidly descended, as though the one whom he was pursuing was only a few paces in advance.

Hillson was not quite so forgetful as his friend. It occurred to him that if the Black-feet had darted from the main trail at this

point they were likely still to be near it. Instead, therefore, of rushing after his companion, he paused for a moment and glanced searchingly about him.

Nothing met his eye, and he was on the point of following the other, when something moved in his field of vision. It resembled a short, thick stick, which appeared to fly up a few inches from behind a large rock. He caught only a glimpse of the object, but it was enough to reveal that, instead of what it seemed, it was the arm of an Indian, exposed for the instant, as if he were striving desperately to accomplish something before he could be prevented.

Suspecting its meaning, Hillson, with a couple of bounds, reached the other side of the rock, where he came upon the vagrant Black-foot known far and wide as the Wild Cat, who was making a fierce effort to reload his Sharpe's or single-shot rifle, before the youth should disappear in the direction taken by his friend.

The warrior was in a kneeling posture, and in the act of fixing a cartridge at the breech,

when the young officer descended upon him. It was an act of amazing carelessness that led the Wild Cat to unmask himself in the manner described, and was explainable only on the ground of his furious haste, which caused him to forget himself for the instant.

Even with Hillson within arm's length, and holding him at his mercy, he persevered in the attempt to reload his piece, which would have been re-charged before, but for the haste which caused him to drop the cartridge.

“You scoundrel!” exclaimed the lieutenant, drawing his revolver; “drop that gun, or I'll riddle you!”

The Wild Cat continued his effort in a vague way, but the cartridge dropped a second time from his fingers, and, instead of picking it up, he turned his painted visage toward the youth and said:

“Me no shoot—me friend of white man!”

Under other circumstances the phenomenal effrontery of this proceeding would have brought a smile to the face of the officer, who could not treat the wretch as he deserved, since he was helpless, but had he continued his

attempt to reload his gun, Hillson would have executed his threat. Now, however, he was surprised to discover that the terrible warrior was too badly hurt to aid himself. Immediately after uttering his words, he attempted to rise, but reeled backward, and had he not grasped a sapling, he would have sunk to the ground.

It was not strange, perhaps, that on the discovery of his condition the emotions of Hillson underwent a revulsion, although he was filled with consuming wrath a moment before, and could hardly restrain himself from taking instant vengeance on the one that had come within a hair of slaying his best friend.

Something akin to pity now stirred the lieutenant at sight of this grim warrior in his pitiful plight. No wound could be seen, and Hillson, after studying him a moment or two, concluded that in his haste to escape the levelled Winchester he had injured himself upon the rocks. If such were the fact he would speedily recover.

Knowing the venomous nature of the Black-feet the lieutenant was not free from the

suspicion that, after all, the Wild Cat was feigning a weakness with the purpose of throwing him off his guard, but if so he failed in his design, for the officer did not remove his grasp from his revolver during the brief interval he was studying him.

The result was the conviction that he had been injured in some unaccountable manner. Indeed, but for the extraordinarily tough character of his race, it is likely he would have swooned when striving, with the help of the sapling, to stand erect. The youth believed he turned pale, but the paint on his countenance prevented any certainty on that point.

Even in his pity Hillson did not forget his caution, for he had seen a supposed dead warrior, when stretched upon the ground, make a lightning-like blow with his knife at the surgeon bending over him, as a rattlesnake will strike when wounded unto death.

“I’ll take your gun, if you please,” said the youth, setting his own against a tree, reaching his hand forward and grasping the rifle of the Blackfoot. The latter made no attempt to retain it, but loosening his fingers,

allowed it to pass into the hands of his master.

The only other weapon visible was the hunting knife, shoved behind the girdle at his waist. Hillson hesitated, but, knowing his task would not be finished until he secured that, he deftly extracted it, without any protest on the part of the owner.

It was singular, perhaps, but at the instant the young officer's hand closed about the buckhorn handle, the thought flashed upon him that the weapon had been used against many an innocent member of his own race. With a shudder, as if it were a serpent, he flung it twenty feet away through the wood.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SIGNAL.

THUS Lieutenant Hillson had actually made prisoner of the notorious Indian known as the Wild Cat. This rogue took his place some years before on the reservation with the rest of his tribe, expressing his intention of adopting the calling of a farmer for the rest of his life and becoming that rare personage known as a "good Indian," respecting whom some military authorities claim the last one perished long ago.

The Wild Cat lived up to his profession for a few weeks, and then in a quarrel, brought about by himself, slew one of his people. He was arrested by the Indian police, but broke away and took to the mountains. Occasionally he ventured upon the settled portion of the reservation, and was engaged in other brawls,

becoming known as one of the worst tempered and violent of his race.

We have shown that, whether on his own hunting grounds or the reservation, this outlaw could always count on the active sympathy of his people. The most peaceful Blackfeet, who abhorred his crimes, used every effort to baffle the officers of justice in their attempts to place him beyond the power of doing further harm. Patient and well-disposed as were the authorities, it is not to be supposed that they would have put on mourning had they learned of his death at the hands of known or unknown parties. Had Hillson and Palmer returned to the fort with word that in an affray with the Wild Cat, they had found it necessary to despatch him, the chief executive would never have been petitioned to pardon them.

But enough has been said to show the character of the prisoner that had fallen into the hands of Lieutenant Hillson, who, realizing the importance of the capture, asked himself the question: "Now that I have caught him, what shall I do with him?"

The plan of taking him twenty miles and more to the fort could not be contemplated with pleasure, since he was too weak to walk, and if his captor waited until he recovered he was sure to take advantage of the many chances offered to escape before leaving the mountains. Hillson naturally disliked to share his horse with him, for such a companionship was repellant in every sense.

While these thoughts were passing through the brain of the youth, the prisoner himself was an interesting study. Hillson had formed a theory about his hurt which afterward proved to be correct. The Blackfoot, in his desperate hurry to avoid the bullet that was on the point of being fired at him, flung himself with such violence to the earth that he struck a boulder with sufficient force to knock him almost senseless. It was a singular accident to befall such a veteran mischief-maker, but when he rolled among the undergrowth and behind the rock, it was with an instinctive rather than a reasoning impulse, and his senses left him altogether at the moment of finding the refuge.

Chivalry would have required his companion

to remain with him and give what help he could in his extremity ; but chivalry is not so common among the American Indians as some people suppose. His associate cast a single glance at him, and then concluded that his best course was to look after his own safety. Instead of taking refuge near and firing at the horseman the instant he came within fair range, he fled with all speed down the faintly marked path, whither the impetuous Palmer followed with headlong haste.

The shock received by the Blackfoot was of that nature that he quickly recovered, and, brief as was the interval occupied by the young officers in their charge, he rallied sufficiently to comprehend his peril, and, striving hard to reload his gun, was detected, as we have shown, in the act.

The outlay of strength overcame him, and the red man was nearer swooning outright than ever before. Only by the supreme exercise of his strong will did he succeed in keeping his feet, with the help of the sapling at his side.

Hillson was sufficiently skilled in reading the

symptoms which he sought to hide to observe that the redoubtable warrior was rapidly becoming himself again. That being evident, he was sure to be equally quick in regaining his natural viciousness. The youth had possession of his gun, and, slipping his revolver in place, he held one rifle in either hand, the knife having been eliminated from the problem.

“Wild Cat,” said he, “you are at my mercy, but the white man does not make war like the dog of a Blackfoot; I will not hurt you if you do as I tell you.”

“Wild Cat can’t walk,” was the reply, as the warrior still clung to the sapling and looked at the lieutenant with an expression that would have touched his heart had he not suspected its sincerity.

At this juncture, Hillson, to his delight, caught a familiar signal. It was a clear, sharp whistle, such as he knew was made by his brother officer, who meant it as a call for him to join him at once.

“I wonder whether he, too, has an elephant on his hands,” was the thought of his friend, who noticed that the summons came from a

point considerably removed ; “if he has, we must manage to pool our issues.”

Turning to his prisoner, who must have noticed the signal, he added :

“ Wild Cat, walk ahead of me in this path ; you are strong enough to do that, and you can't deceive me. I will follow you, and if you do as you are told, you won't be harmed, but if you attempt to dodge among the trees or call to your friends, I will fire upon you at once.”

The warrior looked keenly at him, as if debating some plan for misleading him ; but the handsome face of the officer could be stern when necessary, and, as the best and only course left to the Wild Cat, he began moving along the trail, but did so with great slowness, as if suffering pain.

Possibly such was the fact, but the occasion was one for harshness ; and stepping from the path, so as to place the warrior in front, he allowed him to hear the click of the hammer on his rifle as he raised it.

“It all depends on *you*,” said he ; “walk along the path and don't look around, but if you don't——”

The break in the sentence was as expressive as any words could have been, and the Wild Cat asked no further explanations.

It was an extraordinary sight, this veteran Blackfoot warrior, wearing the scars of many a fearful hand-to-hand encounter, plodding sullenly, but submissively, in front of the youth, who kept only a few paces to the rear, with his senses on the alert, and half convinced that he would have to carry out his threat of summary punishment before advancing a hundred feet.

Hillson would have signalled to Palmer to join him but for the suspicion that he was involved in some difficulty with his own particular Blackfoot, which rendered it out of his power to respond. Despite the lieutenant's misgivings, however, the Wild Cat maintained his deliberate progress for nearly fifty yards without any change of gait or apparent purpose of rebelling against his strange captivity. But, before long, Hillson became aware of a disquieting fact.

A faint call, seemingly made by some bird, sounded through the wood, but it was so

nearly inaudible that had he not been listening intently, he would not have noticed it. Even as it was, it is doubtful whether it would have disturbed him, had he not observed a slight movement of the Wild Cat's head. It was just the least possible flitting to one side, which gave a brief glimpse of the profile. There was no change in his pace, nor any evidence that he had noticed the soft, tremulous call, other than the one described, and even that seemed to be due to a momentary forgetfulness that could not occur again.

“It is a signal from the other Blackfoot,” was the conclusion of Hillson; “he must have eluded Palmer, and is stealing back to help this one. Well, that makes two of them, and I have a couple of guns, even if one is unloaded, but I am afraid they will prove more than I can handle—— Ah!”

To his surprise he caught precisely the same signal again; but, instead of coming from the point where first heard, it was to the right, and, more significant still, much closer than before.

The Wild Cat moved like a feeble old man,

not turning his head in either direction. He could not have failed to hear the second sound, but nothing in his demeanor indicated the fact.

“This contract is growing faster than is agreeable,” thought the lieutenant, “but I can’t back out now—— There it goes again!” he added, as the bird-like call sounded so near that he knew the Indian who emitted it would be in sight the next moment.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CABIN.

LIEUTENANT HILLSON was in a most peculiar situation. The dusky rogue known as the Wild Cat was walking slowly, as if in pain, a few paces in front, while somewhere near at hand were hovering one or more warriors awaiting the chance to strike a blow for the leader.

The second signal showed that the stranger was but a short distance to the right, and the officer was certain he would reveal himself the next minute. His advent upon the scene promised to turn the tables completely, for it will be perceived that every advantage was on his side. It was another example of the hunter who, while hunting the tiger, finds the tiger hunting him.

Hillson had his loaded Winchester in his right hand, and the Blackfoot's unloaded

weapon in his left. Carrying a revolver also, it will be conceded that he was well supplied with the means of defence, but the gun of the Wild Cat was such an impediment that, could he have been sure that the second warrior lurking near would not see him, he would have flung the weapon away.

The Indian acted for a moment as though he had not heard the second call of his ally, which so disturbed the lieutenant, and the latter was left the duty of watching not only him but the other, who was liable at any moment to send a stealthy shot from cover.

It was this close scrutiny of the Wild Cat that enabled Hillson to observe that he was walking slower than before. His step, too, was uncertain, as if overtaken once more by the weakness that came so near mastering him.

“That is all pretence,” was the rightful conclusion of his captor; “he is about to attempt some trick. None of that!” he called to him; “I know what you are driving at.”

The Blackfoot stopped, and, turning half-way round, deliberately stared at the youth, as if studying the expression of his counte-

nance. Then, to the amazement of the latter, he coolly replied to the whistle that had so alarmed Hillson a minute before.

It was a daring proceeding on the part of the Wild Cat, and looked as if he meant openly to defy his captor, who was angered almost to the extent of shooting him, thereby not only ridding the country of a pest, but reducing the number of his enemies demanding immediate attention to unity. Instead of doing so, however, he resorted to a shrewder artifice that would have done credit to a veteran frontiersman.

“Wild Cat,” said he, “signal again to your friend, and tell him that if he makes the first move against me, I will shoot you! He may bring me down, but not before I can send a bullet through you, and *I’ll do it!*”

The officer uttered these words in a loud voice, intending they should reach the ear of the second Indian, for whom they were specially meant. Perhaps the latter did not understand the English language, and it was well to employ an interpreter.

The lieutenant hardly expected to be obeyed

as promptly as he was, but the Wild Cat instantly emitted a tremulous whistle, so different from his previous one that it was evident it conveyed another meaning altogether. Whether this was of the precise character Hillson had in mind, and whether such a message could be transmitted by that means, may well be doubted, but it must have been quite easy to warn his associate against any attempt to harm the white man.

This was bringing speculation down to a fine point, and Hillson had no time nor disposition to follow the train of thought suggested by the action of the Blackfoot. He was in constant fear of the appearance of the one that had first given the signal, with a complication that must increase his own danger to an alarming degree.

It was awkward to carry two rifles, one of which was pointed at the target in front, but he managed to do so, determined that there should be no mistake as to his earnestness. The Wild Cat walked with the same sullen deliberation as before, while the youth devoted his energies to the task of keeping him under

his eye, and maintaining a lookout for the other.

Skilful and daring as was Lieutenant Hillson, it was beyond his power to hold his advantage for more than a few minutes longer, without receiving aid from some quarter. His threat probably frightened the Wild Cat into uttering a warning signal to his friend, but the latter would have been quick to see how easy it was for him to fire a shot so instantly fatal that the leader would be in no danger at all.

It was at this critical juncture that Hillson, looking at his prisoner, observed something moving just beyond him. Before he was quite sure of its meaning, the warrior stopped, threw up both arms and called :

“Huh ! huh ! no shoot !”

There was good cause for the cry, for the figure in front of him was Lieutenant Palmer, who, catching sight of the savage, instantly brought his rifle to his shoulder with the intention of firing.

But the path just there was perfectly straight, and when he pointed his gun at the Blackfoot he descried his friend, so exactly in range

that a shot at one was likely to endanger the other.

“Don’t fire,” called Hillson in turn, “he is a prisoner of war.”

Palmer lowered his weapon and stared enquiringly at the Indian, who still hesitated to advance.

“That’s the head scoundrel,” remarked the first lieutenant; “it was he who gave me that snap shot, but what do you mean to do with him?”

“I want your help to decide.”

“There’s a cabin right behind me, which we can use for a prison until we make arrangements to dispose of him.”

This was interesting news to Hillson, who ordered the Wild Cat to resume his advance. The officer followed only a few paces, when he observed a small natural clearing in which stood a heavily built cabin, one story in height and perhaps twenty feet square. The single door affording ingress and egress was open, and a large, well-favored man stood just outside calmly contemplating the curious proceedings.

The Wild Cat stopped, and since the individual was a stranger to Hillson, he hesitated whether to repeat his order. Suspecting his embarrassment the man called out :

“Send him right along ; the door is open for him.”

The Blackfoot must have realized at this moment the great error he made in warning his ally to remain in the background, for, had he been on hand to use the opportunity presented in the slight confusion that lasted for a second or two, the prisoner could have dodged among the trees and been off like a shot.

But it was too late now, and, hiding the exasperation and chagrin that must have gnawed at his heart, he strode through the open door with a certain dignity, and entered the cabin.

“Now let us do the same,” said the first lieutenant, “for there are more of them in the neighborhood.”

He knew nothing of the warrior who, after approaching within striking distance, had withdrawn at the command of his master, or he might have shown greater hurry. Hillson

believed he would be heard from, and he nervously followed his friend within the structure, the host stepping quickly after them and instantly closing and securing the door.

The astonishment of the visitors was increased by a glance at their surroundings. The cabin, as we have stated, was about twenty feet square and a single story in height, but one half of the apartment was covered by a broad shelf or planking, between which and the eaves was a foot's space and with three times that extent in the middle. The ends of a number of buffalo, bear, and beaver robes showed that this portion was devoted to sleeping purposes, it being reached by several cross pieces nailed against one side of the cabin, almost directly beneath.

The floor was made of well-fitted logs, roughly dressed, and worn smooth by much tramping of feet. There was a small stand or table, several stools, a short, low bench, and a fireplace with a lot of wood piled near it, as if in readiness for use, though there was none burning on the hearth. The fireplace was of the most primitive pattern, built of stone and

set even with the wall, the prime object sought evidently being strength and security.

The door was massive, and when closed and secured was almost as strong as any part of the structure. On the side opposite were two narrow, window-like openings for the admission of light. They lacked panes, but could be closed by pieces of planking when danger threatened, their straitness being such that a child could not have been forced through either of them.

The occupant of this cabin was Hadley Rainsford, a man of powerful physique, a little past middle life, with grizzled beard and hair, bright blue eyes, strong features, and prepossessing manner. He was attired like a professional sportsman, and encountered anywhere would have attracted favorable attention. His rifle was of the latest pattern, and it was evident that, although following this singular hermit life, he was an individual of intelligence and culture.

“Well, here we are!” he said, in his cheery way, after glancing about the room, “and if you will keep out of range of those windows, we may dismiss all thoughts of troublesome

neighbors for the present. I think when supper-time comes we can scare up something digestible. I don't know," he added, glancing quizzically from one to the other, "whether it is a safe proceeding, lieutenants, for me to receive a couple of United States officers into my house when I am an intruder myself."

"We are here unofficially," said Palmer, with a laugh, "and having accepted your hospitality, we cannot violate it."

"The crime is not a heinous one, anyway, and I would be glad to have you make me a visit, if we only knew what to do with this precious fellow."

He looked at the Wild Cat as he spoke. The white men had seated themselves, but the warrior stood on the side of the room furthest from the door. His arms were folded, a scowl upon his forbidding features, and his black, serpent-like eyes seemed to be staring at the solid logs before him, as if seeking to pierce them and peer among the trees beyond. He did not speak nor seem to notice the words of his captors, though it is safe to believe that none of their words were lost upon him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A YOUNG HOSTESS.

NATURE has given the red man a repellent countenance, with his large nose, high cheek-bones, and retreating chin. His face was made doubly repulsive by fantastic daubs of crimson, black, and white paint spread over forehead, nose, cheek, and chin. His long black hair, instead of being gathered in the defiant scalp-lock, dangled about his shoulders, the coarse strands showing that they, too, had received their share of paint, of which the American race is so fond.

“What did you do with *your* Indian?” asked Hillson, turning with a smile toward his friend.

“I didn’t get a chance to do anything with him; I found he could beat me running without half trying, and there wasn’t much hope of tiring him out, as he had the better wind.

The longer that sort of race continued the better it was for him. When I caught sight of this house I concluded to let up on my fugitive and make a few investigations on my own account. Mr. Rainsford had heard the guns and was in his door wondering what it meant, when I loomed up in his field of vision."

"Not precisely in the dignified style of which the West Pointer is so fond," said the gentleman, in his pleasant way, "for at the moment I saw you, your foot caught in an obstruction, and you had hard work to save yourself going forward on your hands and knees."

"So I did; and when you told me the Indian I was after hadn't passed in sight of the cabin, I saw I was throwing away time and labor. Then I signalled for the lieutenant, and, thinking he might need my services, set out to see what I could do for him."

"Well," said Mr. Rainsford, "you have captured the worst Indian in Montana, and one who I do not believe ever felt a spark of gratitude or honor."

The youths looked wonderingly at the gentleman who spoke with such emphasis. A

glance at the Blackfoot showed that he had shifted his position so as to permit him to lean one shoulder against the side of the structure, his weight resting mainly on one leg, while the toe of the other foot, swung around in front of the rigid limb, was supported on the floor of the cabin.

“You speak pointedly,” said Hillson.

“And I have the right to do so ; ten years ago Morris Hitchman and I spent a part of the summer building this cabin. The reservation was not fairly established, though we knew it was coming. The Wild Cat claimed to be a good Indian, and we anticipated no trouble from him, though the accounts we received from hunters and trappers gave us some uneasiness. We had hard work to get this structure finished, and it was hardly done when he and his gang came down on us like a thunderbolt, and we stood a siege of three days and nights.

“We stayed here all that winter, and exchanged a good many shots with him and his party. Do you see that scar ?” abruptly asked the gentleman, removing his cap and display-

ing a cicatrice on his forehead, plainly observed by both his visitors.

“*He* gave it to me,” added Mr. Rainsford, with a jerk of his thumb toward the Wild Cat, “and about that time I winged him. Hitchman and I secured a good many peltries, and were preparing to start homeward with them when down came the old fellow again with his party. They cut off our retreat to the house, and we kept up a running fight for two hours along the mountain trail. We had to abandon our whole winter’s catch, and more than once I believed, in the language of the hunters of the olden time, that our last sickness had overtaken us. So it proved indeed with Hitchman, for at the very point where Lieutenant Palmer tells me he came so near being shot off his horse, my friend went down, killed so quickly that he hadn’t time to bid me good-by. I was wounded myself, but, as night was at hand, managed to hide among the wood and undergrowth until I got a chance to creep out. I wandered about for several days, more dead than alive, when I came upon a party of trappers, who proved good Samaritans to me.”

“I should think that would have wearied you of the Bear Paw Mountains,” remarked Palmer.

“So it would, but for what happened afterward. I married one of the best women that ever lived. A year later Heaven sent us sweet little Bessie. It seemed as if my earthly happiness was too great to last. But the mother died, and I was crushed with sorrow. The only hope, as it appeared to me, of partially forgetting it was by plunging into these mountains, where nothing could remind me of my affliction. I see now that it was an unwise thing to do, but I came here a couple of years ago and have not been out of the country since. There is such an abundance of game that it is easy to support life, and from the few hunters that know of my presence here, I can get my ammunition and other necessaries in exchange for the peltries which I gather during cold weather.”

“Did you bring your little daughter with you?” asked Lieutenant Hillson.

“She was six years old at the time, and has been with me ever since.”

“But we have seen nothing of her.”

“Hallo, Bessie! where are you?” called Mr. Rainsford.

A rustling was heard among the robes overhead, and to the unbounded amazement of the visitors a little girl about eight years old came down the steps, dropping lightly upon the floor. Smiling and blushing she ran forward, sprang upon her father's knee, received an embrace and kiss, and then, looking at the young officers, said :

“I've been watching you upstairs ever since you come in.”

“Now isn't that odd?” replied Hillson. “I have a little sister at home named Bessie, and she is about your age, and I think she looks almost as sweet as you. Anyway, I want to tell her all about little Bessie Rainsford that I visited away up in the Bear Paw Mountains. I hope, too, I shall be able to tell her that I held her on my knee, and that she gave me a kiss just as she did her father.”

He extended his arms, and Bessie, with a little natural timidity, walked to him and was lifted upon his knee, and at once became a

warm friend of the handsome young officer. He knew how to entertain a child like her, but Palmer complained that he was slighted, insisting that, though he hadn't a sister Bessie, he deserved one, and he was always fond of good little girls.

It was a strange experience of the two in coming upon this dainty bit of humanity in one of the wildest regions of our country. Bessie was unusually bright, for it was evident that her doting father gave much time to her care and instruction. She was educated beyond her years, but retained the infantile ways so winning in one of her age.

Her dress was neat, and little bits of bright ribbon here and there added to the pleasing appearance of her costume. Her luxuriant golden hair, hanging below her shoulders, was gathered with a blue ribbon at the back, while her rosy complexion, clear eyes, and elasticity of frame betokened the highest possible degree of health.

But charmed as were the visitors with her sweet face and ways, they were disturbed to know she was buried in the wilderness, and

not only deprived of association with those of her own sex and age, but saw so few of the necessities of civilization. Her parent had no right, even in the depth of his affliction, to doom her to such a life.

“I know what is in your thoughts,” said Mr. Rainsford; “I have done wrong, and shall make amends; my arrangements were completed to-day to leave this place forever, and unless prevented, we shall start to-morrow morning by sun-up.”

“I am glad to hear you say that,” said Hillson, uttering the sentiments of his friend, “and I hope nothing will occur to prevent your departure.”

It may seem singular that this conversation should take place on the heels of the stirring incidents recorded, and when there was reason to believe more than one hostile Indian was hovering on the outside, eager to give their leader all the help possible. But there were breaks in the sentences, and Mr. Rainsford was ever on the alert, as were his companions. The gentleman, however, gave more attention to the prisoner than did they, and it was this

fact which caused him to make a sign to them to refrain from looking at the Wild Cat, who, there could be no doubt, was up to some mischief.

He had turned his head, so that, instead of gazing at the blank wall, he was able to glance sideways through one of the narrow windows on his right, and Mr. Rainsford was not mistaken in believing the glittering eyes were turned in that direction.

Furthermore, this steady scrutiny was not aimless on the part of the prisoner. He was holding stealthy communication with parties on the outside, though it was done with a subtlety and skill that might have deceived the eye of suspicion itself.

Beyond question between these red men, separated by the wall of the cabin, a plan for the rescue of the Wild Cat was rapidly crystallizing, and an explosion was nearer at hand than even the vigilant Mr. Rainsford suspected.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE STRENGTH OF WEAKNESS.

THE better to carry out the request of Mr. Rainsford, the two officers continued their conversation with him, he answering and speaking as though feeling no interest in the Blackfoot, who was leaning against the side of the structure, and holding secret communication with parties outside. The warrior acted his part with rare skill, as did the single individual or more without, since not the slightest sound indicated what was going on.

Now, while no one of the three cared enough for the feelings of the dusky prisoner to restrain the expression of his opinion of him in language which could not be misunderstood, it was desirable that some things should be kept from him.

“Habla v. español?” (Do you speak Span-

ish ?) asked Mr. Rainsford, turning toward his visitors.

“Si, lo aprendimos á West Point” (Yes, we learned that at West Point), was the prompt reply of Hillson, and from thenceforth for a time the conversation continued in Spanish, which it was safe to conclude was an unknown tongue to all Northern Indians.

“Had your call been deferred a single day,” said Mr. Rainsford, “you would not have found me and Bessie here.”

“Then we are glad it took place when it did,” replied Palmer, “though it might have been better for you had you been absent, for we know enough of the Wild Cat to see you are in danger as long as you are in this place.”

“Yes,” was the quiet reply, “he is incorrigible, and I have been thinking since you made him captive what course should be taken with him. He deserves death half a dozen times over, but that will not warrant us in inflicting it, and I do not see how you can take him back to the post with you.”

“I brought him here alone,” said Hillson, “and it would seem that Palmer and I ought

to be able to drive him in front of us over the trail to the fort, or, since the journey is considerable, we could take him on one of our horses.”

“That would be feasible if the other Blackfeet did not interfere; but you know how ready the friendly Indians are to shield the most guilty of their race. You would be sure to meet trouble by adopting either course.”

“What did you mean by referring to his ‘gang’?”

“He has gathered a half dozen vagrants about him as treacherous as himself; they will seize any opportunity to pick off a hunter in the mountains, as no doubt they have done many a time. I was hopeful, on my last return, that I would find him farming, but, as usual, he welcomed me with a rifle shot.”

“It is unaccountable to me,” said Palmer, “that you expose your child to such great peril, and that, having done so, you have escaped so long.”

“I confess that I ought to have left the hour I learned our danger, but I was hopeful that the Wild Cat and his men would be won over

at least to neutrality by fair treatment. I once did a good turn for a Crow warrior, and he has been my friend ever since. I tried it with this rogue, and the mistake was well-nigh fatal. It is only recently that I reached the decision that he is so bad that all efforts are thrown away on him. When the conviction came I resolved to leave this spot forever."

"What are your means for doing so?"

"I brought an excellent horse, and he is turned loose in a valley less than a fourth of a mile away. I take a look at him every day or two, and occasionally enjoy a little spin on his back. If I can bring him to the mountain trail, knowing none of the Wild Cat's gang is in front of me, I shall have no fear of harm to me and mine, for he is as fleet-footed as the wind."

"We know that the Indian's weakness, like that of many white men, is horse-flesh," observed Palmer, "and I wonder that your animal was not stolen long ago."

"There has been risk from the first, as a matter of course, but you must not suppose that the Wild Cat and his fellows lie awake

nights planning schemes for my harm. They have other mischief on hand, and have let me alone for higher game."

"Why not propose that we will let him go if he and his men will molest us no further?" asked Hillson.

"He would accept it at once, and then seize the first chance to break his pledge; he can't be trusted to the least extent."

"Doubtless you are right; but why not hold him as a hostage?"

"That is the only scheme that promises anything, but I see no way of carrying it out. There must come a point when the honor of the Indian will have to be trusted, and at that moment the break will take place."

"Suppose we make no conditions, but release him offhand, will he and the rest lie in wait for us, or will they besiege the cabin in the hope of securing us all?"

"My belief is that they will slay us all, if the way opens for doing so. You put an unpardonable indignity on him by making him a prisoner when he was temporarily disabled, and he suspects I mean to leave with

my little girl, so he would bend all his efforts to capture the cabin. If he succeeds none will be left to accuse him, and the colonel at the fort can never learn who is responsible for the taking off of his two fine young lieutenants.”

“Then, Hillson and I should watch for the chance to steal away and make haste to the fort for the help that the colonel will be only too eager to send.”

“Do that, and the solution is found; but——”

Some minutes before this little Bessie Rainsford, who had consented to perch herself again on the knee of Lieutenant Hillson, noticed that her friends were using words that were unintelligible to her. She looked enquiringly from face to face, and hearing nothing to interest her, fixed her gaze on the prisoner, who was leaning against the wall, near one of the narrow windows, seemingly paying no attention to anything.

She had seen so many of his people that she felt little fear of them. She was like the fawn, which unhesitatingly trots up to the hunter with no thought that it is approaching

its deadliest enemy. Sliding off the knee of the officer, she picked up one of the stools and walked to where the Wild Cat stood, setting it down so near him that the edge touched the fringe of his leggings. Then, placing her hand on one of his forearms, she said :

“ You must be tired ; sit down.”

The Blackfoot turned his head like a flash. His attention was directed so intently elsewhere that his first thought was that he had been detected. It was a striking proof of the subtlety of the American Indian, that whoever was on the outside became aware on the instant of the interruption. Had any of the white men within peeped through the opening at that moment, he would have discovered nothing to explain the telegraphy that was going on an instant before.

The Wild Cat glanced down at the little girl, whose hand rested on his arm, the two being still folded, and shook his head.

“ Wild Cat no sit down.”

This was a decisive declension for a warrior, but it did not satisfy the young lady. She insinuated her chubby fingers between the outer

forearm and the wrist of the other with such deftness that, ere he was aware, she had broken the lock, as it may be called, and the limbs dropped to his sides. He was about to refold them, when she closed her fingers about his wrist and said :

“ I want you to sit down, 'cause, if you aint tired, you will be very soon.”

The appeal was accompanied by such a smart backward pull of the Indian's arm that he was forced to make an undignified movement to save himself from sitting down on the stool. It must have angered him, and more than likely he would have struck the innocent cause, but for the presence of her friends, who shifted their seats in order to watch the curious proceedings.

Still holding his wrist, Bessie added :

“ You *must* sit down.”

CHAPTER XXV.

THROUGH THE LINES.

PERHAPS the Wild Cat saw that the easiest course was to comply with the orders of the little empress, for, with an odd grin on his painted features, he seated himself on the stool and looked at the child that had compelled him to obey her.

The others smiled, but even the father was not prepared for what followed. The Wild Cat allowed his arms to hang at his side for a second or two, as if in doubt what to do with them. Before he could decide, Bessie climbed upon his knee, and, with the confiding faith of childhood, gazed up in the repellent countenance and straight into the serpent-like eyes without a tremor of misgiving.

“Have you a little girl like me?”

The American Indian justly bears the repu-



THE LION AND THE LAMB.

tation of a stoic so far as all outward expression of his emotions goes ; but it is safe to say that if ever one of them was completely floored it was this Blackfoot when the golden-haired Bessie, sitting on his knee, asked her question. He looked down in her blue eyes, but his dusky lips remained closed. Far be it from us to speculate upon the feelings that stirred the depths of that heart, but he was a human being like ourselves. Though the river may be frozen deep, yet far below the solid shield the crystal water flows, and the ice itself must yield in time to the rays of sunlight that fall upon it.

“Have you a little girl like me?” repeated Bessie, seeing that he hesitated, as though he did not understand her question.

“Wild Cat hab young warrior—hab girl, too,” came the reply in tones which Lieutenant Hillson will always insist showed a perceptible tremor.

“So you’ve got a little girl,” repeated Bessie, her face lighting up. “I guess her name aint like mine ; my name is Bessie ; what is your girl’s name ?”

“She be Aff-to-wa.”

Bessie’s laughter rang out so merrily that her friends smiled.

“Aff-to-wa! what a funny name! Why don’t you call her Bessie, or Susie, or Dolly, or some other name that I used to know in St. Paul. Have you ever been in St. Paul?”

The warrior shook his head.

“It’s a nice place, and we are going back there, for I don’t like to stay here. Papa promised to take me back to-morrow, and we mean to start real early.”

Rainsford glanced at the officers and remarked in Spanish:

“The secret is out now without mistake, and the Wild Cat knows it all.”

“We’ve got a horse that I’m going to ride on with papa; he’s a good way off, where the bad Indians can’t find him; it’s down *that* way” (pointing with her hand), “but I know you won’t tell the bad Indians, for papa is afraid they will take Saladin away.”

“We’ll let the young tell-tale alone,” said her parent with a smile, “and she will give her whole family history.”

But childhood is impulsive, and Bessie switched off in characteristic fashion :

“ Won't you bring Aff-to-wa to see me before we go away ? ”

What the Wild Cat's answer would have been can only be conjectured, for the opportunity was denied him. The words were yet upon the childish lips when the reports of several rifles rang out in the stillness, and Lieutenant Hillson, who had shifted his seat more than his companion, felt the wind of one of the bullets, which whizzed in front of his eyes and was buried in the wall opposite.

It was a startling interruption, and for a few seconds each white man believed one of his friends had been killed. They leaped from their seats, while the terrified parent rushed to his child, who was on her feet, bewildered like the others, not knowing what it all meant.

It was a cunning scheme of the marauders outside, and accomplished its end marvellously well, for it was meant to give the Wild Cat a chance of escaping from his prison.

Thinking only of Bessie, the father caught her in his arms, and stepping hastily back, so

as to be out of range of the windows, he asked :

“ My dear child, are you hurt ? ”

“ Why, no, papa ; but what made him set me down so quick ? ”

Expecting another volley, the young officers imitated the action of their host, not pausing to catch up their rifles, which were leaning against the wall near the fireplace. As they did so the Blackfoot darted across the room with arrowy swiftness. He seemed hardly a second at the door, but during the brief interval occupied in unfastening it, he managed by incredible deftness to secure his rifle, when he vanished through the opening as if shot from a gun.

“ Shall I fire ? ” shouted Hillson, dashing after him, revolver in hand.

“ No ; what’s the use ? ” demanded Palmer, leaping to his side.

“ Then I’m off after help ! ”

To the amazement of his friend, he darted in the direction of the trail along which he had conducted his captive a short time before. The elder called to him to return, believing he was

rushing to certain death, but the sinewy youth gave no heed, and before the summons could be repeated he was out of sight.

Success often follows such instant seizure of an advantage, the impulse for which comes like an inspiration. Had Lieutenant Hillson hesitated for a single minute, he must have been brought down by one of the dusky vagrants, who dreamed of no such attempt. The shots had entered the rear windows, where the warriors were telegraphing to their leader. They fired blindly, only taking care not to harm the Wild Cat, and then started around the structure to cover the flight of the prisoner, who they knew would seize his opportunity on the instant. Before they could make the circuit he met them.

It was at this juncture that Hillson took his desperate chance, and, instead of turning to the left, on the heels of the fugitive, sped up the faintly marked path toward the mountain trail where he and his friend had left their horses.

He expected to hear the crack of rifles behind him, and perhaps to be wounded ; but

believing he had taken the only course that could save his friends, he bent his whole energies to flight, not venturing to reply to his comrade, nor even to glance over his shoulder.

Lieutenant Palmer was as quick of perception as his friend, and understood the meaning of the break. Dreading the consequences of the reckless act, he held his place by the open door, ready to fire at the first warrior attempting pursuit; but the seconds passed, and he knew Hillson was using them for their utmost worth. Nothing could prevent his reaching the main path after gaining so good a start, for the very boldness of his flight had done that which the most deliberate preparation would have failed to accomplish.

Furthermore, Palmer believed that, though several minutes had passed, there was a chance of following in the footsteps of his friend, and he would have done so but for his reluctance to desert Mr. Rainsford and Bessie.

“Thank Heaven!” murmured the gentleman, when he saw his child was unharmed; “I don’t see how you escaped, but, like the rest of us, you are safe.”

He placed her on her feet again and cautioned her to keep in the rear part of the room, beyond reach of the bullets. She obeyed, as she always did, her greatest wonderment being that the Wild Cat should have set her down with such suddenness before replying to her question.

“I don’t think I would pose there, lieutenant,” said Mr. Rainsford, observing the intense attitude of Palmer at the door. “You wear a nice uniform, but it won’t impress an Indian as too good to shoot at.”

“I was trying to cover the flight of Hillson,” replied Palmer, stepping back and hastily fastening the door.

“Whither has he gone?” asked Rainsford.

“He took a sudden notion to make for the fort, I presume, or some point where he can get help. I don’t know whether it was a wise act or not.”

“That will speedily appear; but there is no questioning its bravery.”

“No one who knows Lieutenant Hillson has ever questioned his bravery,” was the honest compliment of his comrade.

“I observe he went in such haste that he left his Winchester behind, though he may have done so purposely.”

“I am quite sure he did, fearing it would affect his speed, which is of the first consequence in reaching the mountain trail.”

“More than likely you are right; but hark!”

Lieutenant Palmer turned pale, for the sounds that alarmed him and his friend were the reports of weapons from the direction of the mountain trail, which until that moment it was hoped Hillson had reached in safety.

Mr. Rainsford compressed his lips and shook his head.

“I fear the worst for him,” he said, and Palmer’s heart echoed the words.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LESSER TRAIL.

THE shots from the direction of the mountain trail filled Lieutenant Palmer and Mr. Rainsford with dismay, for they proved that Hillson, despite the excellent start gained, had been discovered before he could reach a safe point in his flight from the cabin. Provided he found his mare where she was left earlier in the afternoon, there was a possibility of his getting away, but the chances were so overwhelmingly against it that the two men forgot their own danger in their anxiety for the brave youth who had assumed this risk for their sakes.

“I wish I could go to his help,” said Palmer, pacing the floor, “for I cannot bear the thought of his fighting the Blackfeet alone.”

“If there was the first chance of helping

him I would say: 'Go, and God speed you;' but there is none."

"How are you fixed for a siege?" asked the officer, facing abruptly about.

"I couldn't be in much worse shape; ordinarily I keep several days' supply of provisions on hand and enough water for a week; but, expecting to leave to-morrow morning early, I have enough only to last until then."

"That is sufficient," said Palmer decisively, "for I shall not stay here longer than to-night. We must make a break before daylight; there is no moon until near morning, and that is in our favor."

"Hark!" said the elder, raising his hand. The others listened, but all remained still.

"What did you hear?" asked Palmer.

"Nothing; the firing has ceased, and probably it is ended one way or the other. Hold!" he added, in some excitement; "those reports showed that several Indians were near the upper trail; do you conceive it likely that the Wild Cat will send *all* his men after the one fugitive?"

"Why not? As you have shown, he will

realize that if Hillson gets away he is sure to secure help, and he will bend every energy to prevent it."

"But hardly to the extent of leaving this cabin unguarded, though it may be unwatched at this moment; and if we do leave, *now* is the time."

"I agree with you," said Palmer, greatly impressed, "and we haven't a minute to lose. It won't do to take anything except what can be easily carried in our hands."

"Make sure of the gun of your friend as well as your own, while I look after Bessie."

Naturally the little one required the most attention, for her hat had to be adjusted, her sacque secured about her with some other extra clothing, while no stress of circumstances could induce her to leave her doll Peggy behind. With the help of her father, however, the arrangements were quickly made.

"I will lead the way," he said, observing that his friend was about to anticipate him.

"But you have *her*, and would better keep in the background."

"No; we shall not take the route of the

others, but a new course with which I am familiar. I shall seek the place where my horse ought to be grazing. Come on."

Bessie, who only dimly understood the cause of this hurry, was about to ask for some explanation, but a word from her parent closed her lips, and slipping her hand within his, she bravely accompanied him to the door.

The act of our friends was reckless. Mr. Rainsford paused on the threshold as if about to recede, but, with a prayer to Heaven, he resolutely stepped forward, and moving rapidly, turned to the left, that being the course of the Wild Cat in his dash for liberty.

It seems incredible that a band of Indians, assailing a cabin like that of Mr. Rainsford, should, at the very beginning, give an opportunity to those within to walk forth to freedom. Such a thing, it may be insisted, has never, and, in the nature of things, can never take place.

But for the reports of guns from the mountain trail Mr. Rainsford would not have thought of the attempt he now made. To him

it seemed that failure at one end of the line was necessary for success at the other.

The most trying moment in the flight of himself and the lieutenant was when they turned the corner of the cabin and left the closed door out of sight to the rear. They then knew they had gone too far to return; they had burned their bridges behind them.

The sun had set, and the obscurity of twilight was settling over the dismal solitude. The Bear Paw Mountains, with their vast gorges, cañons, ravines, chasms, wooded peaks, and depths of gloomy wilderness would soon be wrapped in the darkness of night. Rainsford would have been immeasurably relieved could he have postponed the attempt until a later hour, for the chance of success would have been far greater.

“I wish that Hillson had his Winchester,” reflected Lieutenant Palmer, as he glided like a shadow after the form of Rainsford; “for, though I may need it, he is sure to need it still more.”

Mr. Rainsford clasped the hand of Bessie tightly in his own, holding his Winchester in

the other in a trailing position, while eyes and ears were on the alert for the first sign of danger.

Every foot advanced was in his favor, now that it was impossible to return to the cabin. He was following no well-beaten path, but one made by his own feet in visiting the pasturage ground of his horse, and which was marked just enough to make his progress easy. Palmer noticed that it continually descended, indicating that the spot where he had left his animal was in a species of valley, probably a part of that along which the mountain trail skirted.

When the progress had continued a hundred yards the fugitives began to breathe more freely. Now that he was debarred from helping his comrade in arms, Palmer was anxious to protect Mr. Rainsford and his child so far as it was possible for him to do so. It was reasonable to believe, after having penetrated to this point, that whatever danger threatened would approach from the rear. The Blackfeet who had pressed Hillson, so sorely would speedily return to the cabin, and though the

door was shut, they were likely soon to discover what had taken place. They would then know the folks had followed the opposite course from that of the fugitive, and would put forth every effort to overtake them before they passed beyond reach.

According to the views of the lieutenant, his position as rear guard was the most important, and it was this conviction that led him to slacken his pace so as to interpose more ground between him and his friends. Thus, if the officer were forced into a collision with any of the Indians, Mr. Rainsford would have the better opportunity to save the little girl and himself.

Palmer would have preferred to make known the cause of his slackening pace, but it was too perilous to call out. His knowledge of his companion led him to hope he would understand his course without explanation.

But in his anxiety to befriend him and his child, the lieutenant committed the natural mistake of allowing too much space between them. He forgot that night was rapidly closing in, and was alarmed when, in peering

ahead, he failed to see the figures of Mr. Rainsford and Bessie.

“This won’t do,” he concluded, hastening his steps; “it is against the principles of war to divide your forces in the presence of the enemy—— Hallo! it’s all right now,” he added, as he observed a shadowy figure walking ahead of him in the gloom.

He could not see as distinctly as he desired, for, as the trail descended into the valley the density of the woods seemed to increase, rendering the light treacherous and uncertain. There were remarkably few bowlders or rocks encountered, though plenty of them were near. In traversing the route, Mr. Rainsford had naturally sought the easiest course and avoided all obstructions possible.

Palmer saw only the head and shoulders of the figure in front, the rest of the body being hidden by the vegetation which in many places overhung the path. He detected nothing of Bessie, whose figure was too tiny to rise into his field of vision.

It would have been easier for the father to place his child immediately in front or rear,

because of the straitness of the path, and under ordinary circumstances he would have done so, but his solicitude for her was so deep that he could not let her hand pass out of his own, though to retain it increased the difficulty of walking. Should the trail become too narrow to permit them to journey side by side, he would lift her in his arms.

While the general course of the path was downward there were places showing a slight rise, as was the case with the mountain trail along which he and Hillson had ridden earlier in the day, and it was this fact that imparted a bit of information to Lieutenant Palmer which fairly took away his breath.

The figure ahead came more fully into view because of one of the elevations named, than when both were on a common level. There was enough light to show his form quite distinctly to the knees, as it happened that both sides of the path were more open than usual.

Palmer was gaining, and, watching the man as he came into clearer view, he observed that he was alone. Little Bessie was nowhere in sight. He would have concluded that she was

walking in front, had not the second glance revealed that he was not following Mr. Rainsford, but an Indian warrior!

This astonishing discovery, while explaining the child's absence, complicated matters still more, for, despite the lieutenant's care, the force, originally consisting of three men, had been twice divided in the face of the enemy, and here, when he never dreamed of the possibility, a Blackfoot Indian had insinuated himself between him and Mr. Rainsford.

Where he came from, whether he knew of the white man following him while he was prowling after the leader, what his intentions were, whether or not there were others in the vicinity, were questions which it was useless to consider, since it was clearly out of his power to answer them.

"You have no business there," muttered Palmer, breaking into a stealthy lope, and holding himself ready to use one of his guns the instant the emergency arose.

His dread was that the Indian would steal close enough to Mr. Rainsford to do him ill. Taking it for granted that the young officer

was protecting the rear, he was likely to give less attention to that than to the front, thus increasing his enemy's chances in any move against him.

But if the Blackfoot was cunning enough to step between friends in this manner, he was quite sure to be on guard against any such trick as the lieutenant contemplated. Appearances indicated that he was unaware of the whereabouts of Palmer at the moment of entering the path and beginning his peculiar pursuit of Mr. Rainsford and his child, but this ignorance could not continue.

Nothing would have been easier than to shoot the skulking savage, who was only a few rods in advance, but he had no intention of that, since as yet there was no call to proceed to such extremes, and the report of the gun was quite sure to bring others to the spot.

The head, shoulders, and body of the Blackfoot steadily dropped, as, having passed the higher point, he descended the brief slope on the other side, while his pursuer rose more rapidly, for he kept up a trot.

A few seconds were enough to take him to

the elevation, where, recalling that, if the Indian looked around, he was sure to see him, Palmer crouched low and moved as stealthily as he could down the declivity. This extreme care, however, proved unnecessary, since he had taken only a few steps when he discovered that he was following no one. The warrior who was in his front a moment before was there no longer. His keen senses had apprised him of his danger, and he concluded the occasion was a favorable one for disappearing.

While this was gratifying in one sense, it was disturbing in another ; for, to rejoin Mr. Rainsford in front, the officer must continue along the path and pass directly in front of the Blackfoot, who would doubtless be crouching like a panther to leap upon him the instant he came within reach.

But the lieutenant hesitated only a moment as to his right course. He was convinced that the occasion called for a smaller fire-arm than his rifle, and besides the report would not be heard so far away. Accordingly he slipped both guns under his left arm, and, holding his revolver in his right hand, moved down the

slope toward the point where he believed his enemy was waiting for him.

Had he been familiar with the locality he would have tried to flank his enemy, but to turn to the right or left would involve him in a labyrinth of difficulty, with the prospect of losing his way altogether, without giving him the first advantage over his subtle foe.

It was a tremendous test of the officer's nerves. He was advancing upon a treacherous Indian without knowing where he was or from what quarter his deadly blow would come. He was uncertain, even, whether he was on his right or left, but with sight and hearing at the highest tension, he advanced quietly along the trail, glancing in every direction and on the alert.

He had passed perhaps fifty feet beyond the slight elevation, when a shiver of apprehension passed over him, for he was certain he saw the Blackfoot crouching on his right and close to the path. It looked as if he had managed, after all, to come upon the warrior so unexpectedly that he had no time to conceal himself in the abundant vegetation around

him. Certain that he was trying to do so, the lieutenant paused, and levelling his revolver, said in a low voice :

“Step in front of me or I will shoot !”

Possibly the red man did not understand the words, for there was no move to obey the command.

The situation was too critical to admit of trifling. There was no saying how far in advance Mr. Rainsford had got by this time, and the distance was increasing each second. Palmer repeated his command in the same low, but earnest voice :

“Stand up or I will fire !”

Not the slightest movement followed, and with his pistol pointed full at the figure the lieutenant let fly with two chambers in quick succession.

He expected a wild leap and cry to follow, accompanied perhaps by a fierce bound at him, to avoid which he recoiled a step, with his weapon ready to use again, if necessary.

But to his amazement the figure did not stir. It looked as if he had missed and the Black-foot was coolly defying him.

The officer stood a moment bewildered, and then, prompted by a suspicion which flashed across his mind, he stepped guardedly forward and scrutinized the form before him.

“Well!” he exclaimed, “I aint very proud of *that!*”

The remnant of a tree, probably shattered by lightning, so as to leave a few feet of splintered stump, had been mistaken for the form of an Indian and had received the two bullets which the lieutenant was so prompt to fire.

“No wonder he didn’t obey me,” he added, moving hastily past the stump, and wondering how, even in the gloom, he made the absurd blunder.

But his enemy could not be far off, as was proven the next instant, when he was heard moving so hurriedly among the vegetation that his course was easily traceable. He had left the path and was effecting a change of base with all possible despatch.

The lieutenant decided that he had reason to congratulate himself, after all, for though his revolver had inflicted no damage, it was the means of dislodging the Blackfoot from a posi-

tion in which it was easy to pick off the courageous youth.

He knew Mr. Rainsford had heard the report of his weapon, and doubtless would stop in his flight to learn the cause. He was likely to identify the sound as that of a pistol instead of a Winchester, and could not fail to know that the rear guard had collided with the enemy.

Palmer did not dare to call out, though tempted to do so, for he feared bringing other parties to the spot. They were still near enough to the cabin, and, indeed to the mountain trail, for the Wild Cat and his party to hear the report of the revolver, which was likely to hurry them forward.

The gloom was deepening, and the officer was not long in learning that he must moderate his pace to avoid straying from the path and losing his way. He had narrowly missed leaving it more than once, and he found it necessary to halt now and then and use his hands to make sure of the right course.

But recalling that Mr. Rainsford had told him that the spot where he hoped to find his

horse was only a fourth of a mile away from the cabin, he concluded that he had already travelled that distance, and consequently it was time he saw or heard something of his friend.

Pushing on a short way farther, he halted, convinced that it was imprudent to advance another step. He had stood but a minute, however, when he caught the sound of a guarded whistle—so faint that at first he could not determine the point whence it came.

“Possibly it is Mr. Rainsford,” he reflected, “but more likely it is the Wild Cat or one of his warriors, and I’ll make him uncover first.”

And with this prudent conclusion, he crouched as low as possible in the vegetation at the side of the path.

CHAPTER XXVII.

TURNING THE TABLES.

STANDING as motionless as a statue in the gloom, Lieutenant Palmer listened to the guarded signal which reached him from some point near at hand, though so faintly that he was unable to decide the direction, until after a full minute's pause he heard it again, with just enough increase of force to show that the one emitting it was in front and close at hand.

The officer's good fortune thus far gave him enough confidence to reply to the signal when he noted it the second time, though he still suspected it came from a foe instead of a friend.

“Hallo, lieutenant, is that you?”

The query was uttered in a cautious undertone, but there could be no doubt of its source.

“Yes; where are you, Mr. Rainsford?”

The head and shoulders of his friend rose to view, not half a dozen paces away, and Palmer moved forward to greet him.

“It seems to me,” said the elder, “that matters are getting mixed; why did you fire your pistol just now?”

“I tried to hit an Indian, but didn’t.”

“Where was he?”

“He got between you and me in the path; but when he found I was after him, he slipped away. Where is Bessie?”

“A few steps off; she understands the trouble, and not only treads as lightly as a fawn, but hardly ever speaks except in a whisper.”

“Why did you halt here?”

“I missed you, and besides, the spot where I have been keeping my horse is just beyond.”

“Is he here?”

“I haven’t seen him yet, but I am hopeful of doing so. Come with me, and, if you please, don’t fall far enough behind to tempt another interloper to slip between.”

“No fear of that,” replied Palmer, following close upon the heels of his friend.

A few steps farther and he perceived that Bessie was again walking beside her father. Shortly after they emerged into a natural clearing of a half acre's extent. There were bushes and shrubbery at intervals, but even in the gloom it was easy to see the place was admirably fitted to furnish the best of grazing for horse or kine.

The ever-present fear of an attack by the Blackfeet kept the little party on the move. There were many places where a large animal could conceal itself against a prolonged search in the darkness, and the owner of the horse did not attempt to search for him. Instead, he called the name "Saladin" several times, sufficiently loud to be heard a hundred yards away.

The wonderfully good fortune which had attended Mr. Rainsford thus far remained with him, for, at the first call, an answering neigh came from the lower side of the clearing, and the horse, concerning which there was so much anxiety, trotted toward them.

"Oh, there he is!" exclaimed the delighted Bessie, clapping her hands and running a few

steps to meet the noble animal, which, pausing with a snuff of pleasure, reached down his nose for her to caress.

“Mr. Rainsford,” said the surprised lieutenant, “how is it that he is saddled and bridled?”

“I did that this afternoon, removing the bit so that he could graze; you will remember I told you we meant to start early, and though I was obliged to leave many things behind, we are well enough provided as it is.”

“You are fortunate, indeed; but how about leaving this place? We shall have to follow the path that leads by your house and up to the mountain trail, where we are likely to meet our old acquaintances.”

“It is not so bad as that,” was the reply, “though not as favorable as I could wish. We will push beyond this opening, and then, by climbing a steep path to the left, reach the main one, which leads along the mountain side, and which, unfortunately, is the only avenue that will take us out of the neighborhood.”

“Will you mount your horse?”

“Not until we reach the mountain trail, because the climb is too steep, and Saladin will have all he can do without carrying any extra burden, but he will follow wherever we lead.”

The gentleman moved along the upper side of the clearing holding Bessie's hand, the horse just behind her, while the lieutenant, as before, formed the rear guard. Only a short distance was passed when the leader made an abrupt turn to the left, pausing to say :

“The path here is so narrow that we shall have to walk in Indian file ; I will go in front, Bessie next, and Saladin and you last.”

Mr. Rainsford was correct when he said that the tributary trail was precipitous. It seemed to the lieutenant that they were climbing directly up the mountain-side, compelling even such a fine athlete as he to breathe faster than usual, while it was equally hard on the others. He was surprised to observe how well Saladin did his part. Occasionally his hoofs knocked a stone loose, and he stumbled slightly once or twice, but persevered, like the intelligent animal he was. It may have been he remem-

bered his previous experience, for otherwise he must have fallen.

After a time, the leader halted to give all a breathing spell.

“How does Bessie stand it?” asked Palmer, closing in about his friends, and mopping his brow with his handkerchief.

“It’s pretty hard work,” said the cheerful girl, “but I can stand it if you and Saladin can.”

“We haven’t much farther to go,” remarked her father, “and when we reach the mountain trail we will take turns in riding.”

“From that point how far is it to where Hillson and I left it in such a hurry?”

“Less than a fourth of a mile.”

“If I shall be fortunate enough to come across my horse, it will be plain sailing thenceforward.”

“I am sure you build no hope upon any such impossibility as *that*?”

“No,” replied Palmer, with a sigh.

The journey was resumed and found as difficult as before, the progress often being of the roughest nature, but they were cheered by

the knowledge that they were close to the main path or mountain trail.

“This is the last stop,” remarked the leader, when the panting travellers paused again, “for we are within a stone’s throw of the other path.”

“Why should we stop at all?”

“We will be in better shape when the climbing is ended.”

“I will go back a little way,” said the lieutenant, “and listen for the Blackfeet, for it cannot be possible we are rid of them.”

He retraced his steps a short distance, but saw and heard nothing. Recalling the common expedient of persons in his situation, he lay flat on his face and pressed his ear to the ground.

The result was disquieting, for he *did* hear someone treading the path. The sounds were very faint, and when he raised his head became inaudible.

His first thought was that the disturbance was produced by hoofs, but he was convinced that the cause was moccasins and that there were several pairs of them. The fact that he

could hear them at all was proof that they were alarmingly near.

Lieutenant Palmer was puzzled, and for a minute or two undecided what to do. His inclination was to hasten back and warn Rainsford of this new and imminent danger, but he feared his enemies would follow so quickly that escape would be cut off.

He wondered that he could not see the Blackfeet, when, resting on his hands, he raised his head and peered into the gloom behind him, for, as has been shown, there could be no question that they were very near.

For the third and last time he bent his head to the earth and listened intently. To his astonishment he heard nothing.

What could it mean? Could it be the warriors were moving in the opposite direction, and had passed beyond hearing? Or had they come to a halt on learning they were so near the fugitives?

These questions were in the mind of the young officer when a noise, different from anything yet noted, struck his ear, and, before he

could spring up or guess its nature it seemed that a mountainous boulder had fallen upon him.

From the gloom immediately behind bounded a sinewy Indian, landing on the back and shoulders of the lieutenant with a violence that almost drove the breath from his body. He struggled fiercely, but was caught at a fatal disadvantage. He twisted, turned, and writhed with such vigor that he would have displaced the incubus had not his assailant been joined by a second and third Indian, all of whom took a hand in the unequal struggle. The two rifles to which Palmer had clung were wrenched from his grasp, and before he could prevent it he was a prisoner as powerless as a child.

But his tongue was at command, and before any of his captors suspected his purpose he shouted :

“Run, Mr. Rainsford, they have me fast !”

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE WILD CAT'S PRISONERS.

IT was a startling cry that rang out along the mountain-side in the profound stillness of the night, but no one hearing the words could mistake their meaning.

Lieutenant Palmer was quick-witted enough to catch a single ray of hope from a feature of his stirring experience which would have escaped the notice of most captives in his situation. Nothing was clearer than the fact that, had they chosen to slay him, they could have done so with the utmost ease and without the slightest risk to themselves. They had demonstrated their overwhelming strength and their ability to do as they chose with him.

But from some cause they refrained, at least for the time, from offering him harm. He was panting from his severe exertions, and when he strove to rise he was allowed to do so without interference on their part.

The young officer was in a sorry condition. His clothing was disarranged and torn in some places, and both rifles were in the possession of his captors. Little fear of his renewing the struggle under such conditions. He thought there were at least a half dozen engaged in the fight, for at times the red men interfered with each other in the vigor of their efforts. But, looking around in the gloom, only three warriors were in sight. He concluded that the others had hurried along the path in pursuit of Mr. Rainsford.

Of course he could not know whether his warning cry had done any good, but he was hopeful that it had. That gentleman was experienced in the ways of the border, and had come in collision with the Blackfeet more than once. Besides this, he was familiar with the locality, and ought to be able to do far better than anyone else when hard pressed by the Indians. It all depended upon the time the warning reached his ears ; a few seconds might settle his fate one way or the other.

Another discouraging truth flashed upon the lieutenant in his hapless situation. He knew

the rule of the border, that the first step after firing a weapon is to reload it ; but two chambers of his revolver were empty, he having failed to recharge them after his bombardment of the supposed warrior at the side of the path ; but if he could draw the weapon unnoticed, there were enough bullets left for the trio, after which he could rush to the help of his friend.

As he stood on his feet he was surrounded by his captors, and it was impossible to break away in any direction. Not a word was uttered by any one of the party, and he glared at the painted faces dimly visible in the gloom, wondering whether the Wild Cat was among them. He thought not.

Determined to use his pistol if he could, he let his right hand drop carelessly at his side, and moved it cautiously toward the back of his belt. He was sure the action would not be noticed, but it was, and a brawny hand closed like a vice around his wrist. He struggled to free himself and succeeded, but before doing so his adversary deftly extracted the weapon from its leathern case.

At last the lieutenant was utterly helpless. He was only a youth, and these three warriors were in their prime. Having possession of all his weapons, it was useless to resist further, and he gave it up. A feeling of despair came over him, and he sullenly awaited the will of these red men, who had turned the tables so completely upon him.

The next action of his captors showed they could not converse in English. One of them said something, evidently for the prisoner; but, being in the Indian lingo, he had no idea of its meaning, though he had picked up a few words of the tongue since his assignment to frontier service.

The warrior repeated the words in a louder tone, and pointed up the path toward the point where he had parted from Mr. Rainsford. The gesture was such a plain command for Palmer to move in that direction that he obeyed at once.

This was not the order he expected, for he thought his captors would descend the slope again. He had heard no sound from the direction of his friends, and was quite hopeful they

had effected their escape, since the last half, as already shown, was near the main trail, where their horse would be able to make excellent progress.

The Apaches of the Southwest have been known to trot up the side of a mountain for a thousand feet without showing the least evidence of fatigue on reaching the crest. The Northern Indians sometimes display an endurance hardly less wonderful. They are indifferent to cold, heat, hunger, and thirst, and others succumb where they show no inconvenience.

The three Blackfeet holding Lieutenant Palmer in custody climbed the steep path with as much ease as they would have walked the same distance of level prairie, while the youth, who was an excellent specimen of lusty manhood, found the exertion of the most trying nature, due, no doubt, to the fact that he was unaccustomed to that kind of labor. There were other tests of physical endurance which he would have done better than they; for it is beyond dispute that the Caucasian race is capable of development to a higher point in every direction than any other.

While Lieutenant Palmer could see no present hope for himself, his relief was great at observing nothing of Mr. Rainsford and his child, for it seemed to him that, if they once attained the mountain trail, all would be well. The fact that he had heard no guns fired gave him hope.

Ten minutes later the party stood on the level path above, and the keen eyes of the prisoner, scanning the course as far as the darkness would permit, still failed to detect a sign of his friends.

“Thank Heaven!” he murmured, “that the others have been more fortunate than I.”

His gratitude was mingled with a faint hope for himself, for he reasoned that if Mr. Rainsford succeeded in getting away he would make all haste to Fort Assinaboine with word of his misfortune, and immediate steps for his rescue would be set on foot by the commandant. True, the vagrant Blackfeet meanwhile would have abundant opportunity to do what they chose with him; but the military arm, after all, is the deterrent power and the great civilizing agency among the Indians. As has been

stated elsewhere, these red men were well aware that if harm befell him the most searching investigation would be made, with every chance that the crime would be fixed upon the guilty parties and bring certain punishment.

It was not impossible that therein lay the cause of the lieutenant's present immunity. Perhaps the Wild Cat had given orders that he was to suffer no harm until everyone was in custody. This was theorizing to the fine point, but it brought its measure of consolation to the otherwise hapless prisoner.

Palmer was disappointed when, instead of turning to the left, thereby following the course of his friends, his captors took the opposite direction, thus plunging farther among the mountains and lessening his chances of success in case he made a break for liberty, little prospect of any such opportunity being offered while the situation remained as it was.

One of the Blackfeet took the advance, the others walking behind him. The only possible way open, therefore, was by a sudden bound to the right or left. The latter

course would compel him to climb the precipitous mountain-side, where the red men would be upon him before he could take a dozen steps. A leap to the right was equally hopeless, for the slope soon assumed such a steep incline that a venture would be like the plunge of the stricken buck over the precipice.

But the prisoner had scant time for speculation. The trail, which continued uniformly even, wound in and out among the mountains, until, at a shorter bend than usual, a broad ledge was reached, where the width was fully two score feet.

In this place a large fire was burning, with a couple of Blackfeet seated on the ground smoking their long-stemmed pipes, and showing no surprise at the arrival of their companions and their prisoner.

“I suppose this is the court that will settle my case,” concluded the lieutenant, coming to a halt a few paces from the fire, and awaiting the pleasure of his captors.

The three held a brief conversation with the couple, who seemed to feel no interest in the white man, though he noticed they took care

so to dispose of themselves that flight in the only possible direction was shut off.

The brief conversation finished, the two that had risen to their feet resumed their places on the ground, still smoking their pipes. One of the new arrivals busied himself for a few minutes in gathering fuel, which was thrown on the blaze, whose glare must have been visible a long way to the northward.

The lieutenant did not venture to sit down, but stood with folded arms gloomily looking into the embers and occasionally glancing at the red men, whose countenances were doubly repellent in the reflection of the firelight. They often turned toward the trail, as though looking for the coming of someone.

Since there were five of them present, and it was evident others were in the neighborhood, Palmer reflected that Mr. Rainsford must have under-estimated the strength of the Wild Cat's band, for it was likely that the leader had fully as many with him ; and as long as they made their home in the recesses of the Bear Paw Mountains they could defy the police authorities, and indeed a large military force.

One of the captors uttered an exclamation which turned all eyes in the direction of the trail. The lieutenant, doing the same, saw four more warriors approaching. One of them was leading the horse of Mr. Rainsford, and in the saddle sat that gentleman, with Bessie supported in front by one arm passed around her waist. They, too, were prisoners of the vagrant Blackfeet.



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“NOW, KITTY, DO YOUR BEST.”

CHAPTER XXIX.

“NOW, KITTY, DO YOUR BEST!”

R AINSFORD and Palmer gave Lieutenant Hillson more credit than was his due when they believed he left his Winchester behind because it was likely to impede his desperate flight from the cabin. In truth, the officer had not run a hundred yards when he recalled his forgetfulness, and felt he had made a mistake which promised to defeat the very object that inspired the venture. He would have turned back for the weapon had not the thought come too late. He therefore hurried along the trail with his utmost speed. Lieutenant Palmer would have felt no little self-reproof could he have known that he was responsible for the difficulties and perils in which his friend speedily became involved, but such was the fact.

The sudden break of Hillson carried him beyond sight of the Blackfeet before any of

them shifted his position so as to gain a view of the front of the house. The Wild Cat was hardly received into the arms of his friends, as may be said, when one of them took it into his head to bring the other side of the structure under surveillance.

He stole into view a few seconds after Hillson had vanished, and while Palmer was standing in the half-open door, gazing so earnestly up the path that the sagacious warrior read his purpose almost on the instant the door was shut. But for that brief sight he would not have suspected the daring feat of Hillson, who would have reached the mountain trail with an unobstructed road to Fort Assinaboine.

The prowling Blackfoot made known his suspicions to his comrades, and the Wild Cat himself, with one of his best men, set off in pursuit. In doing so they took care to reach the lesser path at a point beyond view of those in the cabin—an unnecessary precaution, since neither Mr. Rainsford nor Lieutenant Palmer happened to be on the watch at that moment.

Even with this mishap all might have gone

well with Hillson but for his hesitation at a crisis when there was not a second to spare. He reached the main trail so far in advance of his pursuers that he could have secured a good start, which, if vigorously used, would have quickly taken him out of the dangerous neighborhood.

It was natural that he should be anxious to secure Kitty, his mare, for once in the saddle, with a clear path in front, he could have scorned pursuit by the fleetest of the Indians, whose horses, if they had any, were beyond immediate reach.

To his keen disappointment, nothing was seen of her nor of Palmer's horse. He paused at the spot where they had been abandoned, but they were gone. He deemed it probable that they had not been captured by the vagrants, since there was no reason to suspect any of them had been there, but all were in the vicinity of the cabin.

It was this hope that caused him to hesitate, when he ought to have turned northward and lost not a minute in leaving the section. The horses, as he supposed, were wandering some-

where near, but whether to the right or left could only be conjectured. He decided to make a hasty search along the trail to the right, which, it will be borne in mind, led deeper into the mountains, and away from any help he might otherwise secure.

He realized the risk of this course, but he did not intend to go far. Should the Blackfeet come up the lesser path, they would have every opportunity to cut off his escape before he could return.

He must act promptly, and, having regained his wind during the brief halt, he resumed his run along the mountain trail, not only peering ahead for his mare, but listening and watching for those whom he dreaded to see.

He had run a short way when he uttered a suppressed cry of delight, for around the first bend in the path he descried both horses, saddled, bridled, and improving the opportunity by cropping the tufts of grass and tender vegetation within reach.

In his joy he called the name of Kitty, who raised her head, and, with a whinny, trotted forward to meet him. He paused long enough

to caress her forehead and nose, and to examine the trappings, when he placed his foot in the stirrup and vaulted into the saddle.

“Now for Fort Assinaboine,” he muttered, “and we’ll soon rout these fellows, and teach them better than to interfere with Uncle Sam’s boys in blue.”

It was barely two hundred yards to the intersection of the trails, and the mare required but a few seconds to reach the point; but swift as was her gait, the Blackfeet beat her. Hillson decided to leave his companion’s horse, in the hope that he might prove of some use to the owner, and he therefore gave his whole attention to the task before him. He meant to urge the mare to the utmost, not sparing her until the fort was reached.

Half the space named was passed when he observed two Blackfeet standing where the paths met. One was the Wild Cat, whom he recognized as he dodged behind shelter. He, too, had committed an error, but just then the chief occupation of all parties concerned seemed to be that of blundering.

The lieutenant, being warned of his danger,

saw he must run the gauntlet or turn about, and fleeing in the opposite direction, enter a network of perils with little prospect of ultimate escape, and with none at all of befriending those in the cabin. But in this instance there was not a second's hesitation on his part.

“Now, Kitty, do your best!”

He touched the spur against her silken side, and she responded with a burst that sent her up the trail like a whirlwind. The officer sat erect in the saddle, with the reins lying loose on her neck, and revolver in hand he charged straight forward, as if resolved to run down the dusky rogues that disputed his path.

Sometimes, at the most critical period in a person's life, the oddest fancies assert themselves. The moment he pricked the mare with his spur, and she responded so gamely, he recalled that wild charge across the grounds at West Point which is the last official “demonstration,” as it may be termed, of the graduating class.

He was once more among the eager cadets as they wheeled their steeds in front of the

academy buildings, and heading toward the hotel, sent them flying on a dead run across the level plain. The horses champed their bits, and in their excitement became almost uncontrollable; their young riders knew that half of them were running away and were glad of it, for it was the one time for animals as well as horsemen to abandon themselves to the thrilling spell which ends the four years' arduous course at the institution.

Lieutenant Hillson lived it all over again. He heard the shouts of the gray-coated cadets as they swung their sabres right and left, slashing at imaginary foes crouching on the ground, and each steed stretched his neck forward in the fierce effort to out-strip his competitors; he caught a glimpse of the blanched faces, the bright eyes, and glowing countenances of the pretty maidens gathered on the hotel porch and along the sides of the plain among the cannon to admire the young heroes as they thundered past; he recalled the scared countenances of the proud fathers and mothers, the half envious glances of the plebes and lower classmen, whose blood tingled

with the thought of the coming June day when they should become the mad body of troopers ; it was all there again—the calmly flowing Hudson, the grand old mountains wreathed in luxuriant foliage, through which the Observatory and the ruins of Fort Putnam frowned, the chapel, the library and academic buildings, Officers' Row, half hidden behind shade trees, the hotel in front, with the gleam and sparkle of the romantic river beyond, Crow's Nest, the rugged crags, the landscape and water, bathed in the glory of summer—all these took form in the gathering twilight as Lieutenant Hillson spurred his mare to a wild run and charged directly at the Blackfeet, who eagerly awaited his coming.

He did not shout, though the old thrill fired his blood, but with pistol levelled at the spot where he knew that two at least of his foes were crouching, he let fly with three chambers, the last being discharged at the instant he was abreast of the spot and speeding by like an arrow.

He did not expect to hit anything, unless by accident, his purpose being to confuse the

miscreants and spoil their aim, when the space was so fearfully short; but he knew they were veterans at that kind of work, and, though they might be bewildered for the moment, they would rally quickly.

Having discharged his three shots, Hillson adopted the Indian tactics by flinging himself forward, with his face close to the neck of his mare, and as much of his body as possible over her right shoulder. This minified the human target, but could not ensure his safety.

The purpose of the young officer was accomplished by his reckless charge. Although the bullets from his revolver whistled harmlessly among the rocks and vegetation, they confused the Wild Cat and his companion for the moment, and prevented their shooting him when he and his steed were almost within arm's length.

As he sped past, the Blackfeet leaped from their shelter into the open path and brought their guns to their shoulders. The mare was going up the trail like a meteor, with only a part of the rider's uniform visible, as he bent

low and refrained from increasing his peril by an attempt to look back.

The two guns were discharged in rapid succession, and then, absurd as the act appeared, both warriors broke into a run after the flying fugitive.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE DEATH OF KITTY.

THE Wild Cat was an excellent marksman, and fully conscious that the youth must not escape, though the motion of the mare and the small portion of his body visible rendered the target a poor one. Had he been erect in the saddle he must of a surety have been pierced by the well-aimed bullet. As it was, he felt a stream of fire run along his left thigh, and he clapped his hand thither to learn the extent of the wound.

The ball had ploughed across the limb, cutting a rent of several inches in the trousers and slightly abrading the skin, but not to the extent of drawing blood. He could not have had a closer call.

The second Blackfoot also fired, but his weapon was not so well directed, and, instead of striking the rider, buried itself in his steed.

Hillson felt the mare's spasmodic shudder

under the saddle and knew she was hit hard. He could not tell how hard, but, because she continued her fierce gallop, he hoped the wound was not serious. He gradually shifted round in the saddle again, but continued to lean forward, with his head bent low, until he could look back at his pursuers.

When he saw them speeding after him on foot he would have smiled but for his solicitude about Kitty. He assumed the upright posture, for by keeping watch of the red men he could tell when either was making ready to fire, and it was easy to fling his body forward again. Furthermore, the distance between them was increasing fast, and he doubted whether their weapons were loaded, since, if they were of the Sharpe pattern (as was the fact), no opportunity for recharging them had been given.

Kitty was swiftly nearing the turn in the trail from which the buck had taken his last leap, and where Lieutenant Palmer came so nigh being winged by the Wild Cat, when her rider was startled by her action. She lurched to the very edge of the path on the left, missing

going over by a hair; then she swung back again, and with a moan reeled to the right and left like a drunken person. At the same moment several warm crimson flecks from her nostrils were sprinkled over the knees of the rider.

She was mortally wounded and could not last a minute longer, but she was game to the end. She knew she was bearing her master from danger, and she gave him the last ounce of strength. She was still on a furious run, and for a moment staggered, as if about to go down, but shaking herself together, pointed her nose up the trail, and bent every energy toward reaching the bend, now but a few bounds distant.

Few forms of affection are stronger than that of a man for his intelligent and faithful horse who shares his perils and privations with him. Lieutenant Hillson had owned his mare for a couple of years, and no deeper pang ever pierced his heart than when he saw her stagger, and knew she was doomed.

“Poor Kitty!” he murmured, as tears filled

his eyes, and he forgot his danger ; “ I would give my right hand to save you, for a nobler creature never lived, and you are dying for me.”

Could it be that the brute, seeing her minutes were numbered, felt that she had but to carry him around that bend in the path to save him ? If she could dash beyond view of the Blackfeet without betraying her mortal hurt they would not keep up a hopeless pursuit, since, by the time they regained sight of the fugitive, he ought to be beyond reach of their guns.

In all probability the pursuers, already far to the rear, would stop on the disappearance of the horse and rider and return to their allies near the cabin.

The lieutenant realized this, and nothing could shake his belief that the last ambition of Kitty was to accomplish the task ; but it was impossible. She labored harder than pen can tell, but at the moment of reaching the spot and about to make the turn, she sank so suddenly that only by great dexterity did he escape being caught. He had barely time to

slip his feet from the stirrups and leap off on the opposite side, when she fell so near the cliff that a few inches more would have carried her over.

It was her dying act indeed, for, with a moan human in its depth, it all ended. With his heart wrung by grief at his great loss and the touching devotion of the animal, he dropped on his face to shelter himself behind her body, and awaited the attack of his enemies.

They were so far away that he seized the chance to fill the empty chambers of his revolver.

“Ah! if I had brought my rifle,” he murmured, glancing down the trail, “I could easily pick off both of them.”

In the chase the Wild Cat had placed himself several paces in advance of his companion, who was also running hard. On seeing the mare fall the leader paused and waited for the other to join him. They stood a minute, as if considering the next step to take; but they could not have failed to see that the officer was without any rifle, and was therefore pow-

erless to injure them so long as they kept their distance.

But the intervening space was within easy rifle range, and while halting the two proceeded to reload their weapons that were discharged just previous to the opening of the race. No wonder that Lieutenant Hillson regretted so keenly that he had left his Winchester behind in the hurry of his flight from the cabin, for no better chance could have offered for checking effectively the assault of his enemies in fair sight before him, and who would not have dared to advance another step.

The afternoon was drawing to a close, and darkness would soon wrap mountain and gorge in shadow. If his assailants could be stood off until night he could stealthily withdraw and reach the more open country to the northward. There he might be able to obtain another horse from some of the friendly Indians, or, failing in that, press on to Fort Assinaboine for help.

Had time been at command the Wild Cat doubtless would have seized the animal of Lieutenant Palmer; but to return for him

now could do no good. Though one only of the Blackfeet started on the errand, Hillson was not likely to stay where he was until his return, and the other horse therefore could be of no help under the circumstances. He was theirs already, and could be appropriated at their leisure.

Hillson's thoughts were busy, and more than one way out of his perilous situation suggested itself. He might leap to his feet and start on a run down the trail, but the act must be instantly perceived by his enemies, who were fleet of foot than he, and would be at the turn before he could place himself beyond reach of their guns, whereas, if they waited until night was fully come, the chance of such a piece of strategy would be immeasurably increased.

What he feared was that the Wild Cat and his companion would climb the mountain side, and, making their way along the precipitous face, get behind him. This being done, they could readily signal to the other warriors and effectually shut off all escape on his part.

The two were still standing in the middle of

the trail, after reloading their guns, as though undecided upon the course to follow ; but, while watching them, Hillson perceived that they had reached a decision, and were coming directly up the trail toward him.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ALONG THE MOUNTAIN-SIDE.

LIEUTENANT HILLSON crouched behind the body of his mare with the coolness of a veteran campaigner of the frontier. He was at bay, and meant to give these dusky miscreants the hottest kind of reception.

It is curious how, at the most critical times, when it would seem that the mind has no room for any thoughts except those bearing directly upon the occasion, little incidents will force themselves upon one's consciousness. At the moment of getting down behind the strange rampart, he recalled the many times he had done the same when a cadet at West Point, undergoing his severe cavalry drill in the riding academy.

This peculiar exercise was not a feature at that institution until 1889, but the young men were allowed to ride "at will," as the expression goes. At such times Hillson and a num-

ber of his classmates compelled their horses to lie down while they fired their revolvers over them. Sometimes the animals were docile, and sometimes they took it into their heads to "kick" with a vigor that made things lively for a time.

All this came back to the young officer at this critical period in his career, and even caused him to smile at the recollection of some of the ludicrous scenes in which he had taken part; but the memories of those halcyon days could not of necessity occupy more than a few minutes of his time.

The Blackfeet had not yet appeared when it occurred to Hillson that he had not chosen the best position for defence. The carcass of Kitty afforded at best only a poor protection against the bullets of his enemies. Such ramparts sometimes do good service on the plains, when those assailed are provided with Winchesters or guns possessing long range, and they are able to stand off their foes by keeping them at a distance, but at close range the rifleballs are likely to bore their way through the breastwork and reach the men behind it.

“Poor Kitty,” he murmured, “no one can serve a master better than you served me, for you have given your life, and no one can do more, but your service for me is ended.”

It was this fact which caused the officer to decide that it was unwise to rely upon the body of his faithful mare as a safeguard against the bullets of his enemies. He believed that the Blackfeet would force a fight at close quarters, in which event, if unable to get a fair sight of him, they would drive their bullets through the warm carcass and reach him as he crouched behind it.

“Good-by, once more,” he muttered, as he sprang to his feet and ran to the rocks projecting from the mountain-side. Behind these he took refuge, with the determination that the contest should be fought to the end from behind this new and improved defence.

“None of the bullets can pierce this stone,” he reflected, as he hastily took position behind it; “it would be safe against a bombardment of artillery.”

It was a wise move on the part of the youth in more than one respect. He could peer out

and watch the movements of his enemies without exposing more than a part of his head to their missiles. Since his left hand was next to the mountain, his right was in proper position to use to the best advantage whenever the vagrants attempted a move against him.

Many a frontiersman, in a similar situation, has been able to hold an entire war party of Indians at bay. All that was needed was vigilance on his part, for no people are quicker to learn the danger to which they are exposed than the dusky mairauders, who prefer a fight in which the advantages are overwhelmingly on their side.

The lieutenant's experience in frontier campaigning had taught him the necessity of seizing his opportunities at once. The change decided upon was effected so quickly that before the warriors could sight their pieces he was beyond reach. They were puzzled for the moment by the act, which clearly gave him great benefit, since they might maintain a fusillade indefinitely without harming him, to accomplish which they must necessarily bring themselves within range of his small weapon.

The Wild Cat, however, decided to try it. Standing less than a hundred yards away, he brought his gun to his shoulder, and, sighting at the bit of officer's kepi, or forage cap, in view, he pulled the trigger.

An instant previous the lieutenant drew back. It was fortunate he was so prompt, for the bullet was well aimed and chipped off a bit of stone in front of his eyes. He thrust forward his head again, but withdrew it with the same celerity when he perceived that the second Indian had raised his weapon, while the leader proceeded to place another cartridge in his own gun.

The lieutenant waited a minute, and hearing no report cautiously peeped out. The warrior had lowered his weapon and was watching for him to show himself. Before he could fire Hillson pointed his pistol at the couple and discharged three chambers. He had no expectation of reaching either of them at that distance, and he was not disappointed, but one of the bullets, impinging against a rock, glanced onward, its form so twisted and flattened by the contact that it gave out an odd whistling

noise quite trying to one's nerves when in its path.

Rather curiously the two warriors retreated several paces, as if startled by the singing ball, but they were too wise to be scared off by so trifling an occurrence.

Every minute counted. Night was closing in so rapidly that already the figures of the Blackfeet assumed a shadowy appearance, and must soon become indistinct, if they maintained their position. Hillson could not afford to wait much longer before resorting to his last attempt to extricate himself from his perilous position.

It was evident that the discharge of the revolver had produced a deterrent effect on the Blackfeet. Though they possessed superior weapons, they were deprived of their full advantage. To strike the youth they must come within reach of his revolver, which he was so ready to use the instant a chance presented itself. But they would not have been worthy members of the American race had they retired before such difficulties. They had allies within call, and there were means at

their command which they had reason to believe were unsuspected by the white man.

The latter kept close watch, believing they would attempt some trick before long, and that the only chance for him was to penetrate their purpose before they could carry it out. To his surprise he abruptly discovered that, instead of two warriors, there was only one in sight. The other had vanished unaccountably, and he had no possible way of learning whither he went.

It might be he had stolen down the trail to bring more of his people to the spot, travelling with such swiftness that he disappeared in the gloom before his flight was noticed, but Hillson believed he was about setting on foot the scheme he dreaded—that of noiselessly climbing the mountain side with the purpose of getting behind him and shutting off his flight.

“If that’s his plan, this is no place for me,” was his conclusion, as he withdrew his head for a few moments; “well, that *is* strange!”

The exclamation was uttered when he peeped out again and failed to see the other Indian.

Both had passed out of sight like dissolving figures of vapor.

The fact confirmed his suspicions. He instantly fired one barrel of his pistol toward the point where they were last seen, his object being to convince them he was still at his post and on the alert. Then he started down the slope in the direction of the fort, determined that, if they were attempting to cut him off, they should find the task more difficult than they anticipated.

Had he continued his flight he would have eluded his enemies easily, for remarkable as was their skill in making their way over precipitous ground, it could not equal his speed along the comparatively level mountain trail below, but, like his army friends, he was actuated by a chivalry which led him always to place the welfare of others before his own.

He was convinced that the loss of his mare had destroyed the scheme he had in mind when he fled in such hot haste from the cabin. Mounted on his fleet animal he would have reached the fort before midnight, while he would be unable to cover the distance on foot

before the following day was well advanced. At the best, help could not reach his friends before afternoon. It seemed to him, therefore, a waste of effort to push on alone, when by remaining in the neighborhood he might be able to give aid to his friends.

Subsequent events proved that Lieutenant Hillson committed a grave mistake in acting upon this theory, for had he pressed toward the fort he could have reached a point of comparative safety in the course of a couple of hours. Not only that, but three other members of his command, who were out on a hunt, had gone into camp where he was almost certain of coming upon them. Of this, however, he could have no knowledge; but his absence would have made the Wild Cat fear the authorities were about to learn the truth, and he was sure to pause before inviting their certain vengeance.

From this it is also manifest that, although our friends had performed more than one brilliant deed, there were other errors made. Had Mr. Rainsford and Lieutenant Palmer been content to stay in the cabin, they could

have maintained themselves against their assailants for twenty-four hours at least, while the absence of one of them, as we have explained, would have prevented the Wild Cat from pressing the siege further than that, if, indeed, he dared to maintain it that long.

The clever exploit of Hillson gave the whites an immeasurable advantage which should have been pushed vigorously to the end, by the continued flight of the lieutenant, while the others should have stayed in the cabin and awaited the development of events. Instead of that, they ventured out, and both, including little Bessie, were made captives by the vagrants whom they were trying to avoid.

Hillson decided to hasten down the slope until beyond the point where the Blackfeet were likely to take the trail, and then wait in the hope that some way would open for helping his friends.

It was perhaps an eighth of a mile from the abrupt turn in the path, which had been the scene of so many stirring incidents, that he came to a stop under the shelter of some of the rocks which were so abundant everywhere,

feeling little fear of being noticed by anyone in passing; unless special attention drew him to the spot.

“I can afford to wait a while, and, if those fellows do not show up, it will be safe to conclude they have gone back to rejoin the rest, and I shall have nothing to fear if I——”

The thought had hardly shaped itself when he was startled by a rattling on the mountain-side above his head. The noise was such as might have been made by the passage of an animal, or possibly the accidental loosening of some stone. That the latter was the cause was proven the next minute, when a bit of rock the size of his hand shot over his head, and, striking the ground with considerable force, bounded across the ledge into the gorge beyond.

CHAPTER XXXII.

UP THE TRAIL.

HILLSON just then was standing so close to the mass of rocks that the missile cleared his crown by several feet, though it might have struck him had he been walking. The incident was something to cause misgiving, but it had hardly taken place when he heard voices so near that he dared not move. The words were in the Blackfeet lingo, so that their meaning was unknown, but he correctly guessed the significance of the occurrence.

The Wild Cat and his companion had done what he dreaded. They had climbed the mountain-side above the trail, and, by a circuitous and laborious course, returned to the path, considerably beyond the point where for a time he held them at bay with his revolver.

The most surprising fact about this piece of strategy was that they went so far below the turn before coming back to the trail. Why

they did this surpassed the conjecture of the lieutenant, but the result placed him in a more delicately dangerous situation than ever.

Within thirty seconds of the fall of the stone the Wild Cat imitated it, except that he halted in the trail instead of bounding over into the ravine, but it gave the lieutenant a shock when the shadowy figure of one of the warriors passed lightly over his head, immediately followed by the other. It was an experience that comes to few people, though it is not strictly correct to say that the Blackfeet leaped directly over his head; they were slightly to the left—that is, a little nearer the angle in the trail than he stood.

His position placed his back against the flat face of the rock, and it seemed to him that he pressed it hard enough to cause a goodly indentation. He would have been glad to push himself out of sight within its solid substance.

It was fully night, and there was no moon. He was enclosed in such deep shadow that he was hopeful of not being seen unless the warriors chanced to come nearer, but it was necessary to remain silent and motionless.

It must not be supposed that Lieutenant Hillson had any thought of submitting in the event of detection. The instant his presence became known the revolver would be called into play, and he was sure to give a good account of himself. It may as well be admitted that he was on the point several times of opening the fight; for, if anxious to serve his friends, how better could he do so than by the extinguishment of the leader and one of the principal warriors?

Could he have been certain of making his way up the trail to where he had left the horse of his friend, and of finding the steed there, Hillson would have opened the struggle in hurricane style and ended it in a twinkling, but to do that was to bank upon too small a capital, so to speak, and, fortunately for himself, he decided to preserve an armed neutrality as long as possible.

The Blackfeet stood for several minutes talking in their characteristic fashion, and then one of them—not the Wild Cat—started on a lope up the trail. The leader remained where he assumed position after vaulting over the lieu-

tenant's head, as if awaiting the return of the other, or some message from him.

The dim figure was outlined so clearly in the gloom that Hillson could tell when his face, his side, or his back was turned toward him, and it need not be said that he watched him with intense attention. The moment his companion left him the Wild Cat faced that way, and gazed after him for a few moments after he vanished in the darkness. Then he shifted about so as to look down the trail in the other direction.

The stillness was so absolute that the youth heard the soft rustling of his moccasins as he gently moved them over the ground. Then he coughed slightly and cleared his throat, just like a white man, and taking a couple of steps, stopped again, his black eyes doubtless searching the gloom, while he listened for sounds that would tell him of the flight of the officer who had held him and his associate at bay with but a single small fire-arm.

The change of position brought the Wild Cat almost opposite Hillson, who was sure detection could not be postponed many seconds

longer. He noted the untidy blanket secured around the shoulders of the warrior, his long, coarse hair, the lower part of his leggings, and the rifle held in his right hand. Once, when he made a partial turn of his head, the officer fancied he detected the Roman nose and retreating chin, though the darkness did not permit a sight of the paint, and it is doubtful whether the features were seen at all.

Justice to Lieutenant Hillson compels us to say he was troubled by nothing in the way of fear. He had made a prisoner of this individual earlier in the day, and there was no cause to hold him in dread in the present turn of affairs.

In fact the young officer was seriously considering the question of taking him captive again. He had no doubt of his ability to do so, and with the Wild Cat held as a hostage, to be given in exchange for the safety of those within the cabin, it may be said that Hillson would have commanded the situation.

The idea was excellent, but there were a number of practical difficulties in the way which might well cause hesitation. He was

afraid the prisoner would prove hard to handle, and when the moment came to deliver him into the custody of his people, Hillson was likely to find himself obliged to keep him company. In other words, being without a secure place in which to hold him, pending negotiations, the result was likely to be more disastrous to the originator of the enterprise than to anyone else concerned.

The lieutenant had not yet reached a decision when a cry like the dismal hoot of an owl came from some point above, and the Wild Cat, with an exclamation, broke into a trot up the path, almost instantly disappearing in the gloom. What the exclamation meant the only listener was unable to declare, but he was quite sure its English equivalent was an expression of disgust and anger.

“He sent the warrior to the bend to see whether I was there ; finding I am not, he has signalled the fact to his leader, who sees no call to linger in this vicinity.”

It would seem that the Wild Cat could not avoid the conclusion that Hillson had effected his escape and was beyond reach, and such

being the case, he would make no further attempt to overhaul him, accepting what had been hitherto done as a failure in every sense of the word.

“His belief that I am on my way to Fort Assinaboine,” thought the lieutenant, “is as effective for present purposes as though I were. It secures me against officious curiosity as long as I use prudence, and increases my prospect of doing something for my friends below.”

This theory sounded logical, but unfortunately the premises were wrong. It was unreasonable to suppose that he could establish any understanding with those in the cabin without betraying himself to their enemies. Furthermore, as the reader knows, there was no one in the dwelling, and consequently Lieutenant Hillson was all at sea.

It was not likely that the Wild Cat or his companion would stay at the bend, but he waited a considerable time before venturing in that direction, peering as best he could into the gloom, and often pausing to listen for the sounds which in the profound stillness

could be heard at a much greater distance than would be supposed.

“I don't think they will wait there, when they must know I would be on the watch for them——”

The thought had hardly taken shape in his mind when he suddenly checked himself, convinced that he had escaped, by the narrowest conceivable chance, walking into a trap that had been set for him.

Close against the mountain wall along which he was making his cautious advance, he detected the outlines of a man, evidently the Wild Cat or his comrade. Whichever it might be, the other was sure to be at hand ready and eager to take part in assailing him.

The officer hesitated for a minute or two as to the best course he should take. It would seem that really there was but the one thing to do, and that was to withdraw without an instant's delay. He had striven hard and shown great cleverness in “holding off” his enemies—that is, he had prevented anything in the nature of a hand-to-hand encounter between them and himself. To advance at

this time was to invite the very thing which he had striven with such success to avoid.

But a daring project had taken shape in the brain of the lieutenant, being nothing less than an attempt to bring down both of his foes, and thus clear his path in the most effectual manner of the vagrants whose taking off would be a blessing in every sense.

His plan was to steal forward as though he did not see the motionless figure so close to the mountain wall. The Indian would naturally wait until he was within certain reach before bringing him down. Hillson, having thrown him off his guard, would be on the watch for such demonstration, and would anticipate it by making a lightning-like assault himself.

It will be understood that the point of this strategy was that it would bring the lieutenant so near that when he raised his revolver and fired there would be no possibility of missing. In other words, it would give him the drop on the other fellow.

But the imminent peril lay in the probability that the Blackfoot would not await the

officer's convenience before opening his batteries. As likely as not he would start things moving before Hillson was ready. The gloom would permit him to move his arms without being perceived in time to be thwarted.

All this was on the theory that the Indian was deceived by the pretence of the officer; but suppose, what was likely, the shrewd scamp penetrated his design, what then?

Nevertheless, Lieutenant Hillson determined to make the rash attempt. Revolver in hand, he moved stealthily forward until close upon his foe, and about ready for the daring attempt, when he once more stopped, and with a smile gave expression to the exclamation:

“Well, I'll be hanged!”

It was neither the Wild Cat nor his companion, but a portion of the rocks themselves, which under his active imagination had taken upon itself the form of an Indian warrior waiting for him to come within reach of his vengeance.

Encouraged by the circumstance, Hillson pushed forward to the spot with less hesi-

tation than he had yet shown, and arrived without seeing or hearing anything of the red men.

It had been his intention to remove the saddle and bridle from the body of Kitty and to hide them among the rocks until he could take them away. The hurry of his flight had prevented his doing this before.

But on searching for the remains of the animal they could not be found. Carcass as well as trappings were gone, and it was easy to guess the explanation.

The Wild Cat had appropriated the latter, after which, with little effort, he rolled the body over the precipice to follow that of the buck. Hillson remembered hearing a peculiar rustling and crashing which could have been well caused by such a proceeding on the part of the dusky miscreant.

The lieutenant approached the edge of the ravine and looked longingly down in the gloom. The darkness was too deep to permit him to distinguish anything, and as he turned away he heaved a sigh to the memory of his faithful beast.

He had set out to aid his friends in whatever way might present itself, and he now resumed his guarded advance along the mountain trail, little dreaming that the most trying experience of all awaited him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

“GOOD-BY!”

THERE were seven of the Blackfeet vagrants gathered round the fire to which Lieutenant Palmer was conducted, and where he had stood only a few minutes when Mr. Rainsford and his little Bessie were brought upon their horse, which was led by another of the red men, who had three companions.

It was a painful shock to the young officer, who, though overtaken by misfortune himself, was confident until then that it had gone well with the others. But here they were, with only Lieutenant Hillson unaccounted for, and now the dispirited Palmer began to fear the worst for him.

“We made a great mistake,” remarked Mr. Rainsford, “for we ought to have stayed in the house where we were safe for a time at least.”

He had dismounted and lifted Bessie down.

The lieutenant walked forward and took his hand, after which he leaned over and kissed the child, who was quite bewildered by the turn affairs had taken.

The Blackfeet showed no disposition to molest them further than to take good care to prevent any escape on their part. They had disarmed both men, and so placed themselves that the latter were shut off from any attempt at flight. The only way open led to the mountain trail, and it will be understood that neither thought of a dash in that direction. They could not have been more secure had they been locked within the granite walls of a penitentiary.

“I heard your call,” said Mr. Rainsford, after the lieutenant had briefly related the particulars of his mishap, “and managed to reach the main trail, but they were right on our heels. Before I could vault into the saddle with Bessie, she was snatched from me and my gun was knocked from my grasp by one of the neatest tricks you ever saw. I did not believe it possible the thing could be done so cleverly. Still, you may be sure I would

have made a fight but for the certain consequences to her. The warrior who held her told me in broken English that if I would surrender she should not be hurt, but if I did not they would dash out her brains. Little reliance is to be placed on the pledges of these people, but the risk was too dreadful to be contemplated, and I gave up. They allowed me to mount and hold Bessie in front, but one of them took Saladin's bit and started in the other direction along the trail. They went a considerable distance, when, from some cause, they wheeled about, and here we are."

"There are many things about this business which I do not understand," said the lieutenant; "there has been a good deal of firing, but none of us has been hurt, unless it is Hillson. Why didn't they finish me when they had me on my back, and why didn't they shoot you and Bessie instead of bringing you in prisoners?"

"The Wild Cat is their leader, and no doubt they are following his orders."

"But why should he give such orders? What can he wish to do with a party like us?"

“He may want to hold us as hostages in order to make terms with the authorities.”

The lieutenant shook his head. To him the theory was untenable.

“The only explanation that occurs to me,” he said, after a minute’s thought, “is that which we have discussed before. The Wild Cat desires to put us all out of the way, but is afraid his crime would become known, and he would be hunted down, unless he can destroy us all so absolutely that no trace will be left to tell the tale. If he can bring in Hillson the conditions will be just what he is trying so hard to make them, for then he will have free rope and need not fear punishment.”

“Then we are already doomed.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Look behind you.”

The lieutenant’s back was toward the trail as he faced Mr. Rainsford, who was looking the opposite way. Palmer turned like a flash at the words, and saw two warriors, one of whom was the Wild Cat, approaching the camp with Lieutenant Hillson between them.

The latter, in playing his game against the

Blackfeet, had taken desperate chances. He acquitted himself admirably more than once, but he prolonged the contest with the experts in treachery, with the result that he was outwitted at last.

It was the hope of helping his friends that led him to steal along the mountain trail toward the scene of the trouble, instead of hurrying off for help. He proceeded with the utmost caution, and walked directly into the trap set for him. He was pounced upon and disarmed before he could help himself, and thus it came about that every one of the party fell into the power of the Wild Cat, and the hopeless condition spoken of by Lieutenant Palmer became a reality.

Lieutenant Hillson smiled sadly as he caught sight of his friends, and shook his head, like one who realized the woful blunder he had made. He looked at the Wild Cat as if to ask his permission to join the others, but the leader gave no sign, and he walked forward to where they were standing.

The conversation, as may be supposed, was of anything but a cheerful nature. The scene

became a striking one. In the open space, at one side of the mountain trail, was burning a fire which illuminated the broad level area, enclosed on all sides but one by stone walls, too precipitous to be scaled by man or animal.

Two horses, saddled and bridled, stood close to the rocks on one side of the blaze, while, with the exception of three of the Blackfeet, the warriors assumed all manner of indifferent and indolent attitudes.

Four were smoking, one was stretched full length on the ground, seemingly interested in the fire, two were examining the horses and equipments, as if pleased with the prizes whose ownership they envied, while a characteristic jerking conversation engaged at times nearly all of them.

On the broad, flat boulder, placed opposite the animals and near enough to the blaze to feel the ruddy warmth, were seated the Wild Cat and two companions, evidently his favorite warriors. One was smoking, and all were talking in low tones, accompanied by frequent glances at the whites. There could be little

doubt they were discussing the disposition to be made of them.

Mr. Rainsford and the two officers stood facing each other as nearly as that could be done, and so close together that their voices rose hardly above a whisper, for they now used English instead of Spanish. The stillness, with the slight interruptions named, was profound. The young men held their arms folded, and in the glow of the firelight looked strikingly manly and attractive. Both had made a gallant fight, but fortune at last turned against them.

As Mr. Rainsford looked from face to face he held the hand of Bessie clasped in one of his own. He had asked her to rest herself by sitting on the ground, but she preferred to keep her feet, and looked wonderingly from one to the other, perhaps with a clearer idea of the situation than any suspected.

“I believe as you do,” said Hillson to Palmer, after the latter had repeated his belief that the Wild Cat was only awaiting the capture of the entire party before putting them to death; “so long as he feared that one of us

had got away he did not dare take the risk, but now there is nothing to restrain him.”

“We shall be missed in time,” remarked his friend, “and the colonel will have search made for us; perhaps, too, it will become known that we have fallen victims to the vagrant Indians, but as to who our slayers were——”

He finished the remark by a shrug of the shoulders and a shake of the head. The three men could discuss their own awful fate thus coolly, but they forgot that young as was the child that glanced so silently from one to the other, as these fearful words were uttered, she comprehended their meaning.

The three Blackfeet sitting on the boulder near the blaze were in a row, the Wild Cat being at the farther end, where he was only partly visible to the prisoners. Bessie, as if wearied with listening to her friends, turned her attention to the group. Just then the leader leaned forward, and, grasping a piece of wood at his feet, gave it a slight toss on the fire. As he did so the glare lit up his countenance—the dangling hair, the Roman nose, the retreating

chin, and the daubs of paint being as vividly seen as if the sun were at meridian.

“Why, there’s the Wild Cat!” exclaimed the child, as if she had not noticed him until that moment, and before her father read her purpose she slipped her hand from his, ran between the knees of the leader, and looking into his face with her winsome smile she asked :

“Why didn’t you speak to me before ?”

The savage, with a forbidding scowl, pushed her from him.

“Go way—don’t want.”

“But I want to talk with *you*,” and with childish persistency she forced her way to her former position. He made as if to thrust her from him again, but the effort was weaker than before, and she would not be denied. In a twinkling she was on one of the brawny knees, and with the same innocent expression placed one of her dimpled arms around the dusky shoulder and said :

“What a funny name your little girl has ! I can’t think of it. What did you say it is ?”

“Aff-to-wa.”

“Won’t you bring her to see me? I want to play with her. I haven’t any little girls to play with, and I get so lonely.”

The warrior made no further effort to drive her from him, while his immediate companions looked on in silent amazement. Indeed, all the Blackfeet were gazing at the extraordinary scene, while the three prisoners, faced that way, held their peace and wondered what the outcome would be. Had the Wild Cat offered the prattling child any harm, every one, though unarmed, would have sprung upon him, but they awaited the issue of one of the most remarkable situations that can be conceived.

With her hand resting on the shoulder of the vagrant, Bessie pushed aside the coarse, dangling hair, a portion of which lay on his chest, and it seemed that her tongue could never be still.

“We are going a long way,” she said, “but you must bring Aff-to-wa to see me. I will let her play with my dolls, and I’ve got a real nice one that I will give her, and she can stay, oh!

the longest time with me ; and when you come to take her away you can stay a long time, too. Do you like dolls ? ”

The painted countenance, so close to her own, remained as immobile as the face of a stone image.

“ I guess you’re too big to play with dolls, but papa loves everybody that loves me, and he will give you lots of nice things, so you must come ; won’t you ? ”

Still the iron features gave no sign. Seeing that he did not mean to speak, Bessie continued :

“ Do you want me to kiss you ? ”

The Wild Cat nodded his head, and the spectators were dumfounded when the child touched her mouth to the coppery lips of the savage. Those who looked closely at the dusky arm that hitherto had only half enclosed the tiny figure saw it draw closer, and he held her for a moment just as any affectionate parent might clasp a cherished child to his heart.

Only for a moment, however, when he released her, and she sat back on his knee, her

countenance aglow with happiness, while she still looked at the features, seeing a beauty visible only to one of her pure and spotless nature.

“You haven’t told me whether Aff-to-wa is coming to see me when I get home to St. Paul.”

“She come,” replied the Wild Cat, nodding his head several times, as if to make up for his former refusal to answer her questions.

“I am *so* glad,” said the delighted child; “I will send Peggy to her.”

Running to her parent, she made a demand for her pet doll, which was under his special care. With a smile he produced the somewhat dilapidated plaything from within his coat, where he had hoped to preserve it for her against a happy deliverance out of their troubles.

“She is yours, Bessie; do what you please with her.”

Hurrying back to the Blackfoot, she pressed the precious pet upon him. The iron features relaxed as he curiously surveyed the gift, and

he made as if to return it, but she persisted, and who shall measure the grief of that little heart on parting company with that which could not have been dearer had it possessed life and being!

“Tell Aff-to-wa that Bessie Rainsford sent it to her, and you have promised to come and see me at St. Paul, and now Wild Cat,—that isn’t a very nice name,—we will have to leave you.”

She slid off his knee to the ground, and at the same moment the Indian stood up and said something to his companions. They stared, as if doubting his meaning, whereupon he repeated the words so angrily that they bounded to their feet. He could be as harsh as death to his friends as to his enemies.

Still holding the hand of the child, the Wild Cat walked around the fire to where the horse of Mr. Rainsford was nibbling at the few scant blades of grass growing near, and taking hold of the bridle, led him to the group of prisoners. Then, fixing his black eyes upon the owner, he said:

“You ride him—you go.”

The hunter was too wise to show his surprise or to hesitate, for at this point everything depended on promptly accepting the extraordinary offer of the Blackfoot. He was acting under the impulse of such an unwonted emotion that it was not likely to last. Mr. Rainsford placed his foot in the stirrup and swung himself into the saddle. It was the Wild Cat himself who handed the child to him, and he set her in front, where he was accustomed to hold her when travelling.

The leader spoke sharply to one of his men, who quickly led the other steed to the spot without a word of protest.

“You ride—you go,” he said, addressing Palmer, who whispered to Hillson at the moment of mounting :

“Get up behind me ; it won’t do to wait a moment.”

The young officer saw the situation, and, with slight assistance from his friend, bestrode the horse behind him. The Wild Cat spoke brusquely again, and each man received back his fire-arms.

All were now mounted, with the heads of

the animals pointed toward the mountain trail. The situation was unparalleled, and the hearts of our friends throbbed painfully. They feared every moment that the Wild Cat would become ashamed of the weakness that impelled him to the step and break forth into greater fury than before ; but they had their weapons now in their hands, and the instant result of such a reversal of sentiment would be a fight to the bitter end.

The Wild Cat was standing in front of the horsemen, as if undecided whether to step aside, when Bessie, from her father's arms, said :

“ Well, Wild Cat, good-by ! ”

She leaned as far over as she could, and the dusky vagrant, without a moment's hesitation, met her, and once more, and for the last time, the kiss was given and taken.

“ Don't forget to bring Aff-to-wa to see me. ”

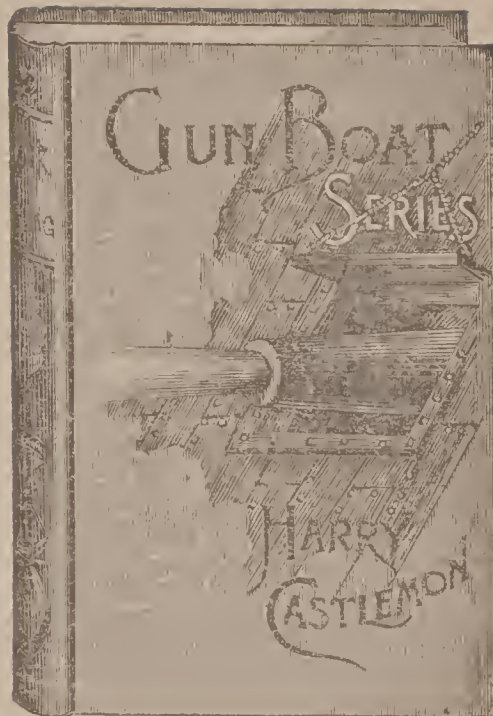
By a common instinct Mr. Rainsford and the two officers raised their hats in salutation, not only to the Wild Cat, who now moved aside, but to the other warriors that

were silently gazing at the most remarkable scene they had ever witnessed, and then they rode out on the mountain in the darkness and headed northward toward Fort Assinaboine.

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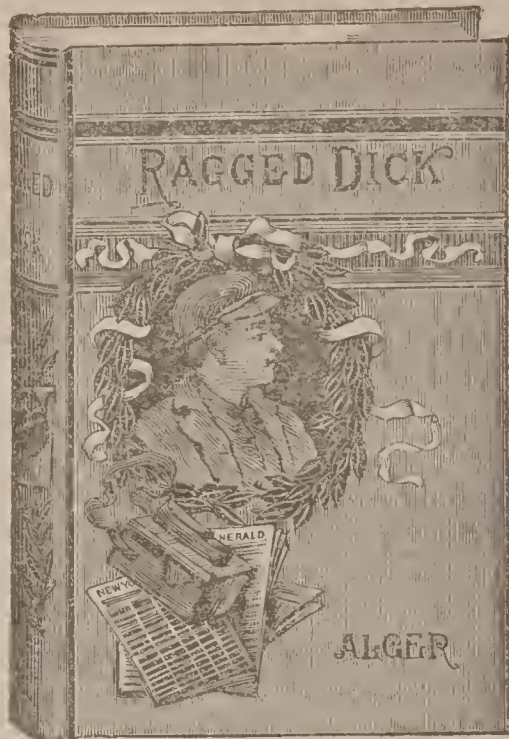
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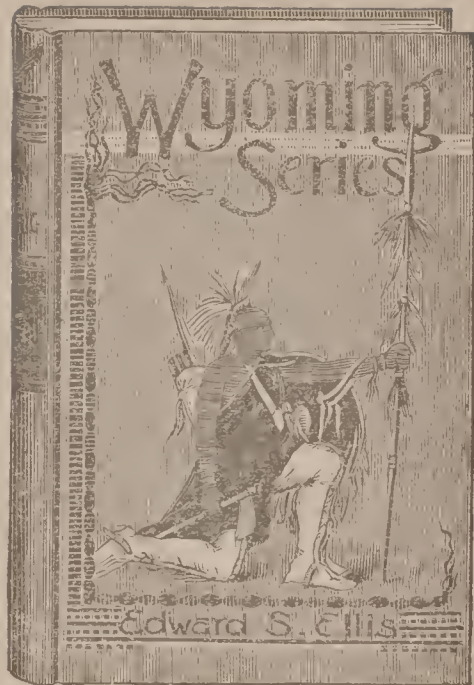
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